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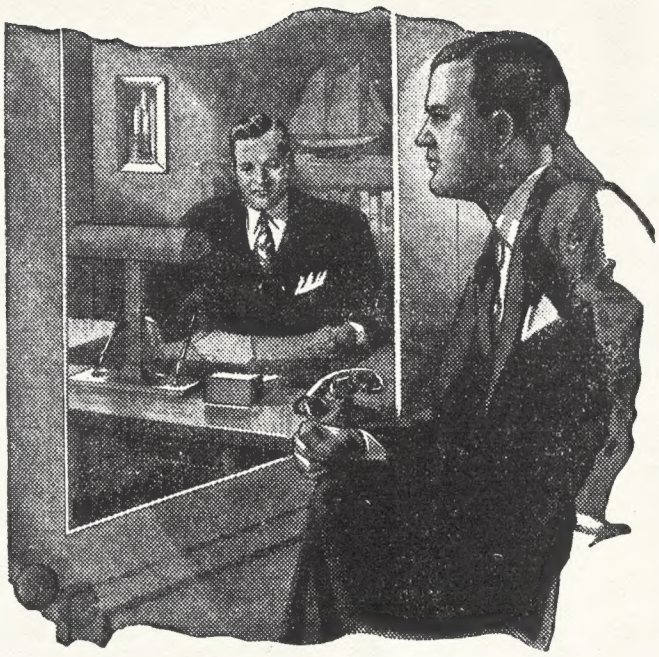

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VOLUME 14, NUMBER 3 | Every Story Brand New | APRIL, 1946

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Former cowpuncher Matt Stilwell battles a passel of ornery land hogs!

WILDERNESS JUSTICE — *by Harold F. Cruickshank* **76**
The happiness of Dal and Mary Baldwin is threatened by a feared rustler.

FEATURES

TRAIL CAMP — *by Foghorn Clancy* **6**
A friendly department of live-wire news and chatter of ranch and rodeo life.

GRIZZLY BEAR IS WHERE YOU FIND IT — *by Tex Mumford* **96**
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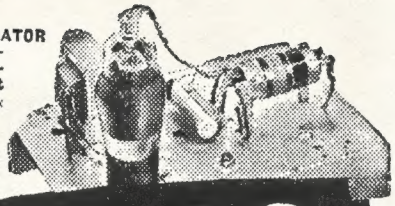

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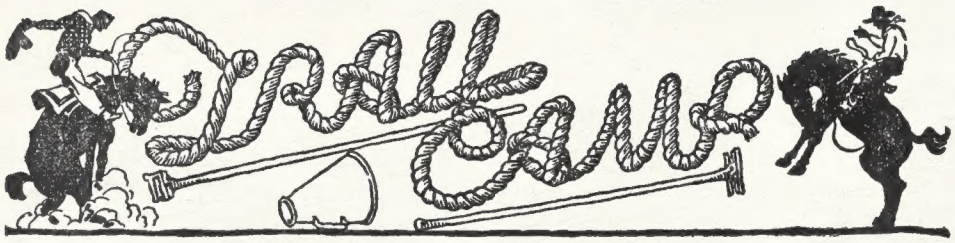


A Department for Readers Conducted by FOGHORN CLANCY

America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

HI, WADDIES, light, ground-hitch your cayuses and gather 'round the old Trail Camp for another gabfest. Sundown Slim always uses the expression, "There's been a lot of water under the bridge" since certain things happened, and likewise there has been a lot of water under the bridge since we last gathered round the old Trail Camp.

If you remember we made our camp at that time in New York at Madison Square Garden and were awaiting the opening of the World's Championship Rodeo. Well, both the Madison Square Garden and the Boston Garden Rodeos, graced by our appearance, if there is any grace to our appearance, have come and gone and we have moved the Trail Camp to Florida, where we are now awaiting the opening of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Championship Rodeo in the Municipal Stadium in Jacksonville. The big stadium has a seating capacity of eighteen thousand.

This rodeo here is being produced by Tommy Horner, a cowhand, who has been in rodeo for about fifteen years. He was in the service for a couple of years or more and saw combat duty in several of the European theatres of war, returned, and was discharged. While he was an excellent steer wrestler before going into the service, he had dabbled with the production end of the rodeo to some extent, and with quite a degree of success, so after receiving his discharge he decided to go in for rodeo producing, and will produce five or six rodeos in this state this season, starting off with the rodeo here.

The Rodeo at Philly

If you remember at our last meeting at the Trail Camp the rodeo was going on at the Arena in Philadelphia, produced by Col. Jim Eskew, with Roy Rogers as guest star. No doubt you would like to know how it came out. Well, it was a big success in attendance and financially, having packed houses each performance except the first one, which was a little light owing to several big counter attractions.

The final results in calf roping were: First—Roy Matthews; Second—Irby Mundy; Third—Buddy Mefford; Fourth—Bill Parks. Paul Gould won the bronc riding, Claude Morris was second, Ralph Collier was third and Shirley Hussey was fourth.

Al Garrett was best man in the bull riding, Red Wilmer took second place, Bud Kessler was third and G. K. Lewellen was fourth. Hank Mills won the steer wrestling, Eddie Hovenkamp was second, Claude Morris was third and Bud Kessler was fourth.

On to Canada

From Philadelphia, the rodeo, with Roy Rogers and his horse Trigger, went to Montreal, Canada, and there again the business was big. The winners of the final prizes at Montreal in calf roping were: First—Irby Mundy; Second—Roy Matthews; Third—Buddy Mefford. In bronc riding Shirley Hussey was top man, Bob Burrows was second and Pee Wee Morris was third.

Buck Dowell was best man in the steer wrestling, Claude Morris was second, and Jack Jackson was third. G. K. Lewellen won the bull riding, Johnny Chapman was second and Pee Wee Morris was third. G. K. Lewellen also won the bareback bronc riding, while Ralph Collier and Johnny Chapman tied for second and third places.

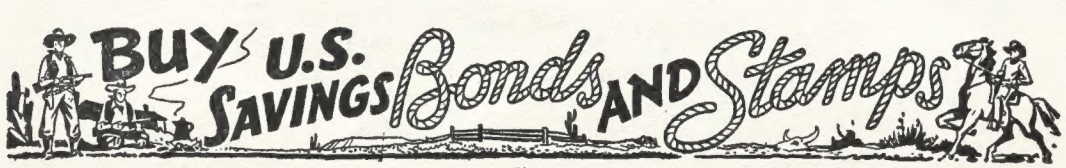
The Montreal Rodeo was the last stand of the season for the JE Ranch Rodeo or Col. Jim Eskew's outfit, and at the close of that engagement Col. Eskew shipped his stock to his eastern ranch at Waverly, New York.

Guthrie's Stampede

John A. Guthrie's Stampede at Hutchinson, Kansas, was a very good rodeo with good attendance. Guthrie was the producer, Frank Autry was the arena director, Jonas Dunson arena secretary, Ken Roberts and Elmer Martin were the judges and Vivian White and Jimmy Schumacher were the timers.

The final winners in bareback bronc riding were: First — Jesse Like; Second — Frank Duce; Third—Gerald Roberts; Fourth—Wayne Dunafon.

(Continued on page 8)



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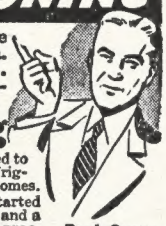

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TRAIL CAMP

(Continued from page 6)

Pat Parker won the calf roping, Forest Andrews was second, Alton Churchill was third and Frank Autry was fourth. Frank Duce won the saddle bronc riding, Roy Martin was second, Jesse Like was third and Gerald Roberts was fourth.

Johnny Spruell was best man in the bull riding, Gerald Roberts was second, Barney Folsom was third and Jack Perry and Wayne Dunafon rode a dead heat for fourth place.

The Adams Rodeo, playing some Canadian dates, suffered from a disastrous fire at Edmondston, N.B., when the arena in which they were showing burned. The troupe lost a lot of livestock, but managed to save enough of their animals so that with a little recruiting of Canadian stock, they were able to keep going and fill the remainder of their dates.

Rodeo Association Standings

The season's race for championship titles with the Rodeo Association of America is going strong. The titles are awarded to the contestants who win the greatest number of points at member rodeos throughout the season, the points being based on a ratio of one point for each dollar in prize money won exclusive of that part of the purse that is made up of added entrance fees. The latest compilation of standings shows Bill Linderman to be leading the field for the title of Champion All Around Cowboy, which title is awarded to the contestant having the greatest number of points in any and all events. Linderman's score is 7,344 points. His brother, Bud Linderman, is in second place with a total of 6,558 points. Gerald Roberts is third with 5,541 points, and his brother Ken Roberts is in fourth place with 5,434 points. Homer Pettigrew is fifth with 5,095 points.

Bill Linderman is leading for the title of champion bronc rider with 2,968 points in this event, George Yardley is second with 2,945 points, Bud Linderman is third with 2,661 points and Bill McMackin is fourth with 2,165 points.

In Bull Riding the leader is Ken Roberts, with 3,588 points. Dick Griffith is second with 2,007 points, Gerald Roberts is third with 1,723 points and Wag Blessing is fourth with 1,486 points.

In the calf roping title race Toots Mansfield is out in front with 3,239 points, Homer Pettigrew is second with 3,034 points, Jess Goodspeed is third with 1,279 points and Jack Skipworth is fourth with 1,122 points.

Bud Linderman is leading in the bareback bronc riding with 2,832 points, Hank Mills is second with 2,509 points, Bill Linderman is third with 2,295 points and Jimmie Sloan is fourth with 1,796 points. Homer Pettigrew is top steer wrestler with 2,034 points, Dave Campbell is second with 1,747 points, Buck Sorrells is third with 1,557 points and Dub Phillips is fourth with 1,516 points. Pud Adair is leading in the wild cow milking, Tom Rhodes in the team tying, Floyd Peters in the

(Continued on page 88)

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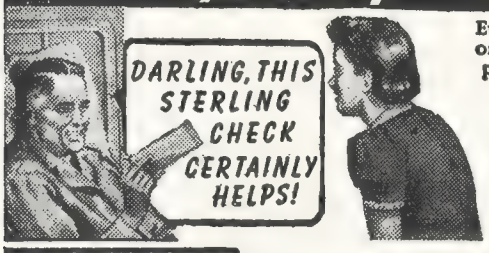

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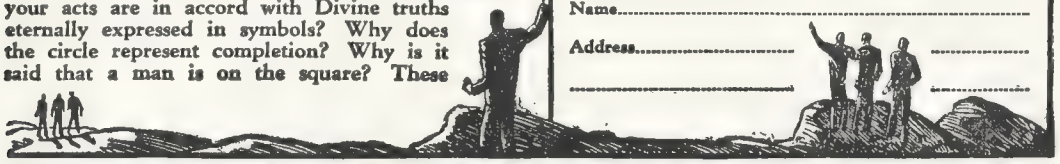

THE ROSICRUCIANS, AMORC - SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, U. S. A.

The swarthy man catapulted over the cantle and hit the ground, a lifeless bundle (CHAPTER XI)

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CHAPTER I

Trouble at Quilado

THE TWO letters had arrived in the same mail and Colonel Beauvine, head of the Cattlemen's Protective Association, spread them out side by side on his desk. One was written on rough, ruled pencil paper and the writing looked uncertain and crabbed. The other showed a bold, flourished script done in black ink on fine, watermarked paper. At the top was an engraved Arrow B followed by the words "Quilado, New Mexico Territory."

Colonel Beauvine read both letters again, dropped them once more on the desk and leaned back in his chair. His broad forehead creased and deep grooves appeared between his eyes. He rubbed his hand along his jaw

AN EXCITING COMPLETE STEVE REESE NOVEL

and then pressed a buzzer beneath the desk ledge.

"I want to see Steve Reese," he told the man who answered the call. He checked the secretary as the man started to close the door. "And round up those trail partners of his, too—Hank Ball and Dusty Trail."

"Real trouble, sir?" the secretary asked.

"It's bound to be when I call in Reese," Beauvine said, and nodded.

He settled again to a frowning study of the two letters. The rest of the mail lay piled to one side, untouched.

Through the open window he could see a panorama of Austin, Texas. Twin poles carried the Stars and Stripes and the Lone Star flag, whipping out to the brisk spring breeze.

The door opened and Beauvine looked up as Steve Reese entered.

"Have a seat, Steve," he invited. "We'll wait for Hank and Dusty."

Reese smiled and sat down. He was a fairly tall man, lithe and supple. His face was deep-tanned by the sun of the Western ranges. Clear black eyes were set well apart in his ruggedly handsome face and his black hair was touched with gray at the temples to give him distinction.

At the moment Steve Reese wore well-cut handsome clothing about which there was no suggestion of the garb of the working, fighting cowboy. At first glance he appeared to be the type of man who would excel as an athletic college instructor. But his appearance was deceptive. For Steve Reese, called "Doc" by his two companions of the trail was known as the foremost field investigator for the CPA. Colonel Beauvine called on him for only the toughest or most dangerous missions, such as this new trouble in Quilado promised to be.

Years before, Reese had been a lieutenant-detective on the St. Louis Police Force. His work had been outstanding, and he had been marked for quick promotion. But the lure of the great open spaces of the West had called him and he had accepted the badge of the CPA. And again his cool courage and straight, shrewd thinking had headed him to the top. Now he was Colonel Beauvine's right-hand man in the field, and well-deserved his pre-eminence.

He was a crack shot with a rifle and could handle a six-gun with blinding speed and accuracy. Well-muscled, light on his feet, he could hold his own with smashing fists in a rough-and-tumble, and a bowie knife in his strong hands could become a terrible weapon.

HE WAS sitting quietly with his legs crossed, his eyes on Colonel Beauvine when the door opened again and a red-headed cowpuncher stood framed in it—Hank Ball. Hank's reckless eyes glittered as they circled the room, came to rest on Steve Reese, and he grinned.

Hank was slightly shorter than Reese. His battered hat was pushed well back on his carrot-colored hair and a neckerchief was knotted loosely at his powerful neck. A faded, checked shirt strained across a deep chest, and holstered sixes were snugged at the lean hips. His long legs were clad in blue levis, stuffed into tooled high-heeled boots.

"Trouble, Colonel?" he asked the chief of the CPA, and his voice sounded pleased with the idea.

"Some." Beauvine nodded and smiled. "Don't you get enough of it, Hank?"

"Not yet, sir. Shucks, I reckon that's why me'n Doc here get paid."

"That's right," Beauvine said, and again his head turned toward the door as it opened.

A roly-poly man with mild blue eyes stepped into the office. Like Hank Ball, he wore range clothes, but he did not wear them with the devil-may-care swagger of the red-head. Instead, he moved as if he had been born tired, and had never been able to rest. His round face looked sleepy and he puffed lazily on a cheap, black cigar.

"Dusty" Trail, however, was the third of the fighting triumvirate of whom Colonel Beauvine was so justly proud. For his appearance also was deceptive, and despite his sleepy appearance, he could move with amazing speed. Those pudgy fingers of his could snake a six-gun from the holster in a deadly blur.

Now as Dusty sank into a chair with a tired sigh, and rolled his cigar around in his fat lips, a wisp of smoke drifted over to Hank, who wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"Corn husks and frazzled ropes," he growled. "Dusty, yuh'll kill yoreself with them things."

"You don't have no cigar savvy," Dusty answered affably. "Yuh look for trouble too hard to appreciate the finer things of life."

Colonel Beauvine cleared his throat to stop

this argument between the two which he knew could go on indefinitely. He picked up the letters from Quilado and studied them again. The three men became silent, sensing that the time for banter was past. The colonel handed the first letter to Steve Reese.

"That's from a man named Bob Aldag," he informed. "He owns the little Running A spread near Quilado. Aldag has been a member of the CPA for years, and he's asking us for help."

STEVE REESE

Reese's dark eyes quickly ran over the crabbed writing.

"He claims he's about to lose his spread to the Barrett Land and Cattle Company," he said, for the benefit of his two listening partners. "He claims to have staked out the Running A according to Homestead Law but the Barretts say there's a title flaw."

"As you well know," the colonel said, "the CPA helps its members in every way it can, and Bob Aldag has a definite right to call on us in this case."

"Looks more like a job for a lawyer," Reese commented, a little puzzled.

The colonel shook his head and passed over the next letter.

"That one's from Tom Barrett, also a member of the CPA, and one of the owners of the Barrett Land and Cattle Company," he said. "Read what he has to say about the trouble at Quilado."

Reese read the letter and looked up, his lips forming a silent whistle. He passed it to Hank, who scanned it quickly and then handed it to Dusty. Colonel Beauvine waited until all three had finished both letters. He folded his hands on the desk.

"You can see the position the CPA is in," he said quietly. "Bob Aldag is a member and claims the Barrett Company is trying to cheat him out of a spread. Aldag claims to have complied with all land laws. If he has a just complaint, then our legal department should be ready to help him."

"But Tom Barrett has the opposite to say," Hank put in, "and one jasper sounds as honest as the other."

"That's right, Hank. Tom Barrett claims that his company bought out an old Spanish grant up in Quilado, giving his Arrow B Ranch the title to all the small spreads around it. Barrett claims these smaller ranches are deliberately stealing his land and defying his title, and the court orders placed against them. If Tom's right, then the CPA should help him and not Aldag."

"But where do we come in?" Dusty asked lazily.

"Barrett also mentions that the Arrow B is being rustled blind. He claims that the Quilado range is ready to blow sky-high, that there'll be plenty of gunplay unless something is done quick to stop it."

"Shore sounds interestin'," Hank said, and grinned widely.

"That's another way of putting it," the colonel said dryly. "Barrett also claims, as you've read, that Arrow B beef is found wantonly butchered, but a lot more of it is rustled. He claims that none of his hands know at what moment drygulch lead will cut them down. They can't go to the corral without being armed to the teeth. That sounds more than interesting to me—it spells trouble in big letters."

REESE leaned forward.

"I wonder if Barrett's telling the whole truth?" he asked.

"What's on your mind, Steve?" asked the

colonel. "You look as if you had an idea."

"You're right about that, Colonel," Hank Ball interrupted. "I can tell that Steve has the case already solved. Of course, he'll need a little help from me."

"An' me, too," Dusty Trail put in hastily. "Ain't that so, Steve?"

Colonel Beauvine scowled. He was a stickler for order and didn't like interruptions.

"Suppose we let Steve talk," he suggested. "We might get much farther."

"Well, the Arrow B and the Barrett Land and Cattle Company sounds like a big outfit." Reese paused questioningly and the colonel nodded. "A big outfit generally has the money and the men to meet any trouble that comes along, either in the courts or out on the range. I'm wondering how trigger-touchy Arrow B men are."

"I've been wondering the same thing." The colonel nodded again. "I don't want the CPA to back either Aldag or Barrett and find itself tangled up in the wrong side of a range war. Both of these men ask our help. One of them is bound to be wrong. Barrett also asks help to check the rustling and seems to have the stronger claim."

Hank arose and hitched up his gun-belt.

"When do we head out to Quilado?" he asked.

The Colonel laughed. "Right away," he assured, and turned back to Reese. "Steve, I'm leaving this whole thing up to you. Use your judgment about it and handle it the way you think is right. The CPA will back you to the limit."

"Thanks, Colonel," Reese said quietly. "We'll look over the ground and try to get the true picture in Quilado. If Barrett's right, I'll tell you, and the legal department can help him. Or help Aldag, if he's got the straight story."

"But stop the rustling in any case," Colonel Beauvine put in. "That's your main job. I don't expect you to decide the land titles. Leave that to headquarters."

"Gladly."

Reese smiled and arose. The colonel extended his hand.

"Handle this like you would a basket of eggs," he instructed. "Range war or range peace may hang on your decision."

"I'll do my best, sir."

The three men filed from the room and the colonel sat down at his desk again. He glanced at the two letters, then gathered them up and put them in a basket for filing. With Steve Reese and his trail partners on the case, Colonel Beauvine could go on to other problems.

CHAPTER II

Gunsmoke

THE three CPA men got off the train the stop before Quilado. They bought horses and gear, avoiding curious questions, and hastily rode out of the town, heading for the trouble spot several miles beyond. They had ridden only a mile or so along the trail, however, when Reese drew rein.

"We'd better split up here," he said quietly, "before some Arrow B waddy or Quilado squatter sees us together. Hank, you know your job. Dusty, try not to look so blamed well-fed. Remember, you're looking for a spot to homestead and you haven't too much money."

"Take his cigar, Doc," Hank said, grinning. "Some proddy Quilado gent'll smell 'em and start salivatin' right away."

Dusty bridled.

"That carrot-top and frazzled temper of yores will cause trouble a heap faster'n a good cigar!"

"Them stogies'd start a toothless grandpap to slinging slugs!" Hank declared.

He waved his hand and rode off before Dusty could think of a reply. Dusty pulled to the side of the trail and dismounted.

"Give me about two hours, Dusty, before you start out," Reese said.

The fat man nodded and made himself comfortable under a tree.

Reese smiled and lightly touched the spurs to his horse, a rangy bay with lots of bottom, the sort of mount needed in this part of New Mexico which was broken and mountainous. A little to the south and west were the mines around Silver City. Near Quilado the peaks were less broken and the valleys between them were wide, giving ample room for ranching. Reese noticed the rich grass that would give extra weight to any beefs that grazed upon it.

The valleys snaked their way through the low-sloped mountains, pinching down at a pass but spreading out again on the other side of the peaks. The pine-blanketed mountains offered ample shelter in winter to protect the cattle from the deep snows or the howling blizzards that came down from the north. It was good country, Reese decided, good for ranching, and some day sawmills

As he saw the wicked wink of gun flame Reese's own Peacemakers blasted a deadly reply
(CHAPTER VII)

would take millions of dollars in timber out of the region.

He rode at a steady pace and the miles dropped behind him. Late in the afternoon he topped a low pass and drew rein. Another valley spread below him, larger than the rest, extending in a blue haze to distant peaks to the west.

But Reese's interest centered on the distant cluster of houses and stores that marked Quilado itself. A metallic gleam in the westering sun marked the line of the railroad, and a dust cloud showed where a heavy wagon rolled along one of the roads. It looked peaceful and quiet, yet the CPA man knew that to be deceptive—as deceptive as his own appearance. For, dressed now in well-worn range clothing he looked the part of a man of the range, with no hint of his actual calling of range detective. There would likewise be no disillusioning when he spoke, for the well-educated Steve Reese could fall into range vernacular with ease and conviction when occasion demanded.

He spoke a quiet word to the bay and started down the slope to the valley floor. He passed a ranch with buildings gleaming white, the yard neat and clean. Some fine horses stamped in the corral. The Quilado region looked prosperous and peaceful.

At last he rode into one end of the main street of the town. There were a few old false-front stores and ramshackle houses, marks of the early days. But mostly the buildings were substantial. The bank, jail and courthouse were of brick. The stores had an air of well-being about them. There were three saloons, two of them in keeping with the general air of prosperity. The third looked down-at-heels and the hitch-rack before it was empty.

Reese pulled in at the rack before the big Tejano Saloon and his eyes passed idly over the brands of the horses tethered there. He spotted three Arrow B brands and a Box L. Reese hitched his own horse and circled the rack. He crossed the planked walk, pushed open the swing doors and entered.

The saloon was quiet, and was richly furnished. The bar was long and highly polished. Four men stood before it, three bunched together and the fourth some distance away. On the floor was a clean spread of sawdust. Tables lined the far wall, two deep, all of them empty at the moment.

The three men who were together turned and stared at Reese as he approached the bar. He ordered a drink in a quiet voice and the three paid no further attention to him. Two of them talked in low tones to a third.

"Nick, yuh're too blamed proddy," Reese heard one of them say. "Tom ain't goin' to like trouble. You leave Ray Lantry alone."

THE man named Nick was short and squat, with beefy shoulders that hunched up around a bullet head. His eyes were muddy and shifty, slightly bloodshot. His nose had been smashed long before in some saloon brawl. His cheekbones were high, his skin dark, suggesting Indian blood. His lips were crooked, and slightly thick. He wore a gun-belt around his thick paunch.

"Squatters ain't wanted in the Tejano," he growled in a husky voice. "This is for Arrow B."

The man standing alone at the far end of the bar checked his whisky glass part way to his lips. He was about forty-five, with a thin face, the line of nose and mouth showing pride and self-assurance. A gun was snugged at his hip but Reese was certain the man had seldom used it. His glass banged down on the counter.

"Speakin' of me, Mosely?" he asked sharply.

Nick half turned, a pleased light touching his murky eyes. One of his friends touched his arm but a single move of the heavy muscles shrugged it off. Nick stepped clear of the bar.

"Meanin' you, Ray Lantry," he said.

"I never heard Quilado wasn't as free as the rest of the country," Lantry said. His clear blue eyes blazed in anger. "I never heard that the Barretts controlled the saloons."

"There's a heap yuh never heard, Lantry," Nick said. His powerful hand dropped from off the bar and hovered over his holstered six. "Sounds like yuh never heard of Spanish grants, neither."

Lantry's fine lips curled.

"Not the kind the Barretts claim."

Mosely's shoulders hunched up toward his ears. Reese tensed, gunplay wasn't far off. The two cowboys edged away from the bar, watching Lantry as though expecting him to make the first move.

"Lantry," Nick Mosely said with slow and evil deliberation, "yuh're a cussed squatter, a rustler and a hoss thief. Yuh got a bar of yellow up yore back a foot wide. Yuh ain't fit to wipe the shoes of the Arrow B Chinese cook."

Lantry's face paled. Nick Mosely didn't wait for him to make a play. The pudgy hand slashed downward and the heavy Colt blurred up with dazzling speed. Lantry started his draw but he was crucial seconds

late. Before the barrel cleared leather, Nick's gun blasted flame and smoke. The man triggered a second time.

Both slugs caught Ray Lantry in the chest. He was driven back against the bar, hanging there like a limp doll. His hand jerked spasmodically away from the gun butt. The sight caught on the holster, held the weapon tilted at a crazy angle before its own weight sent it crashing to the floor.

Lantry sagged, arms hanging low and heavy from his shoulders. Then he slipped forward, hit the sawdust floor with his face. He shuddered, rolled slowly to his side and was still. Nick Mosely watched his work with professional interest, his smoking six still gripped in his hand. He jerked and his shoulders stiffened when a quiet voice spoke behind him.

"Drop that six, Mosely! Stand hitched, waddies!"

Nick's splay fingers opened and the Colt dropped to the floor. He slowly turned, coarse face twisting in anger. He faced Steve Reese, who held matched Peacemakers in his hands. The tanned face was dark with anger. One of the Arrow B men leaned forward, tense, ready to make a play. Steve's voice sounded cold and clipped.

"Don't try it, cowboy. Yore friend just did murder, if I ever saw it."

"Lantry went for his six," Nick Mosely growled.

"That's a lie," Reese said quietly and an angry red flush swept over Mosely's face. Reese glanced briefly at the man behind the bar. "Get the sheriff," he ordered.

"That ain't my job," the man said stubbornly.

Instantly one of the Peacemakers swung into line with the top of the white apron.

"Jailin' a killer's anybody's job," Reese snapped. "Get the lawman."

The man stood stock-still, watery blue eyes searching the tanned face. He saw only determination in the harsh angle of jaw and chin. He edged down the bar toward the door. The Peacemaker swung back toward the two Arrow B hands.

"If your claw gets on that gun butt, yuh'll be hurt," Reese calmly told one of the men. "Mosely, you and yore friends better step up to the far wall. Raise yore hands and keep yore eyes on the paper."

The men moved reluctantly to the wall and Reese shifted so that he could see the batwings. The bartender still moved uncertainly, until he caught Steve's steely glare. He swallowed and hastily rushed for the doors. At that moment they slammed inward, struck by the wide shoulders of a tall young man who carried a six with the hammer dogged back. A star glinted on his open black vest.

"What goes on?" he demanded. "Who did that shootin'?"

REESE briefly outlined what had happened, keeping his sixes on the three men standing against the wall. Nick Mosely growled angrily, started to turn, and thought better of it. He kept his eyes glued to the wall as he spoke.

"He drawed first, Gage, no matter what this jasper says. I got two gents that can prove it, besides the bartender."

"They're lyin'," Reese said quietly.

The young sheriff moved over to the dead man and bent down. He swore in amazed anger.

"Ray Lantry! He's about as fast with a gun as a mossyhorn on a crutch. Who told yuh to kill him, Mosely?"

"Yuh're goin' to loop a hangnoose on me," Mosely said, "on the word of a stranger. I tell yuh, Lantry started the trouble. Breck and Joe here will swear to it."

"That's right, Tex," one of the Arrow B men spoke up.

Tex Gage, the sheriff, faced Steve Reese. The field chief shrugged slightly but didn't let his Colt waver.

"Yuh can believe what yuh want, Sheriff," he said. "I saw the whole thing and Mosely deliberately picked a quarrel. He went for his gun before Lantry had made a move. He put two slugs in Lantry's body and yuh'll find that Lantry's gun hasn't been fired."

Gage picked up the gun and broke it. His long face grew tight when he saw the circle of unblemished shells in the chamber. Young Sheriff Gage was about twenty-five, tall and slender. His movements were sure and quick, muscles rippling smoothly in shoulders and chest as he turned and showed the gun to Reese. His face was long, tanned, his cheeks flat-angled and firm. His mouth and chin were hard, a slight quirk at the corners relieving the harsh lines of the lips. His light hazel eyes glittered as he spoke.

"Yuh're on yore way to jail, Nick. I arrest yuh for the murder of Ray Lantry."

"Yuh'll shore regret it," Nick snapped.

Tex Gage said nothing but he stepped forward and jerked the Colts from the holsters of Breck and Joe.

"Just so yuh don't get ideas," he said. "They'll be behind the bar. Get goin', Nick."

Reese left the saloon with Gage and his prisoner. They turned sharply to the left

and their boot-heels rapped on the planked sidewalk in a steady rhythm. Faces appeared at windows and doors. Men and women on the street halted and watched the little procession. At last they turned into the jail and in a few moments a barred door clanged shut behind Nick Mosely. It released his pent-up anger and he cursed Tex and Reese in a steady flow of profanity mixed with threats.

"I won't be here long, yuh rattle-brained lawman!" he yelled down the corridor at the sheriff. "And stranger, when I'm out, yuh can oil yore gun. Yuh'll shore be needin' it!"

Out on the street again, Tex Gage halted, his face clouding. His glance swept toward a buckboard hitched before the general store and he shook his head.

"This is goin' to be mighty hard," he said. "I got to tell Karen Lantry about her pa."

"Who was Ray Lantry?" Reese asked.

"Owned the Box L, and a mighty fine man. He was fightin' the Barretts like the rest of the small ranchers in these parts." Abruptly Tex turned and faced Reese, sudden suspicion flaring in his eyes. "Who are you?"

"Steve Reese, CPA field representative," Reese answered. He pulled his badge from his pocket and gave the young lawman a brief glimpse of it. "We heard there was trouble in Quilado involving some of our members. I came down to look the situation over."

"There's trouble right enough," Tex sighed. He extended his hand. "Yuh can figger I'll help yuh all I can, Reese."

"Thanks—I'll probably need it," Reese accepted the offer. He jerked his thumb toward the jail. "Is Mosely an Arrow B hand?"

"Gunhawk's a better word," Tex said bitterly. "Why the Barretts hire gents like him and King Olin is beyond me. But we can jaw about that later. I still got to break the news somehow to Karen. She'll take it mighty hard. Art Barrett and King Olin is in town—they've probably heard of the shootin' by now. Breck and Joe will be plumb bustin' to tell the news."

They crossed the street and entered the store. There was a small crowd before the Tejano and a few of the curious came toward the store. Tex looked around over the merchandise tables and counters. The storekeeper jerked his thumb toward the Tejano.

"Karen heard, Tex. She's over there."

TEX swung on his heel and strode out the door. Reese followed him across the street and into the Tejano. A girl stood over Lantry's body, her face buried in her hands, her slim shoulders shaking. Tex hesitated then gruffly ordered the men out of the place. He herded them through the doors and then turned to the girl. She had gained some control of herself and stood there, straight and lovely.

There was a misty red around her eyes from weeping and the tip of her nose was also red. The delicate lips trembled a little but she caught the lower one in her teeth. Her eyes were a sky blue, clouded now, but there was still something fearless and straightforward in them as she looked at Tex. Golden hair was knotted loosely at the nape of her neck. She was dressed in soft shirt and riding skirt that accented the slim loveliness of her figure. Slender feet were encased in pointed, tooled boots.

"I'm—sorry, about this, Karen," Tex said uncertainly.

"Nick Mosely, I heard," she said in a husky voice.

Tex nodded.

"He's in jail. Meet Steve Reese, Karen. He saw it and pinned Nick down until I got here."

Karen turned to Reese and spoke gravely.

"Thank you. This is Arrow B work, and the Barretts must think I'll give up the ranch because of Father's—murder. But I won't. I'll fight them until they kill me, too!"

"Miss Karen," a smooth voice said from the batwings, "yuh tally us wrong, complete. Nobody ordered Ray's killing. We had our differences but we wouldn't want him—hurt."

"Art Barrett!" Karen exclaimed and a look of loathing came in her face.

CHAPTER III

Spanish Grant

ART BARRETT looked like a gambler—not a tinhorn, but the cold, calculating kind who always raked in the blue chips. He was tall and suave, well dressed in open-throat, white shirt and dark trousers stuffed into shining black boots. His face was dark, his black eyes piercing. A black line of mustache decorated his long upper lip with lines of cruelty showing in the corners. He wore a gun-belt

around his slim waist.

"What do yuh want, Art?" Tex demanded. "Yore man's already done enough damage around here."

"Now that's a question, about Nick," Art replied easily. He jerked his head toward his companion. "King and I have been tryin' to get the straight of it."

"Nick picked a quarrel," Tex snapped. "He killed Ray. That's the straight of it. King Olin, the next time one of yore gunhawks gets trigger touchy, I'm holdin' you responsible."

"Yuh got it all wrong, Tex," the man man with Art Barrett answered.

He was a heavy man, with just the barest suggestion of a paunch. His square face looked red and beefy, the flesh puffed unhealthily around the shifting green eyes. His cheeks were full, hiding the harsh strength of the jaw. He wore a belt with the holster thonged down to one thick thigh.

"No use arguin'," Art Barrett spoke up. "I've had a talk with Judge Colmar. Breck and Joe told what they saw and their word is to be trusted over a total stranger's. Here's an order for yuh, Tex."

He extended a paper and Tex hastily read it. His face flushed and he started to speak, but thought better of it. King Olin eyed Reese, his glance faintly arrogant. Art Barrett waited, sure of himself. With a muffled curse, Tex passed the paper to Karen. She read it and looked up, eyes blazing.

"You can't let him go, Tex!" she cried.

"There's nothin' else I can do, Karen," the young sheriff said miserably. "That's an order."

"But he killed Father!"

"It was a fair fight, Miss Karen," Art put in. "Two witnesses swear to it. Nick shot in self-defense."

"That's a lie!"

She turned, fists clenched. She took a half step toward him and Barrett instinctively flinched back. He recovered himself and smiled crookedly.

"Judge Colmar don't agree," he drawled. "Tex, I want Nick Mosely out of jail, pronto. That paper makes me responsible for him. If yuh want him, yuh can always ride to the Arrow B."

"Art Barrett," Karen said in a low, intense tone, "Nick Mosely killed my father, but Nick took orders. Maybe from King, but King moves only when you or your brother Tom tell him to. You and your brother killed my father. You'll pay for it, to the full! I promise you that."

"Threats, Miss Karen!" Art's thick brows

The man drew up his hand dropping to clear his six from its holster (CHAPTER V)

rose. "Tex, mebbe yuh'd better put her in jail until she cools off."

"Blamed if I do," Tex snapped, his face white. "And if I didn't wear the law badge, I'd shore change the shape of yore face, Art."

"Get Nick out," Art growled.

In half an hour Ray Lantry's body had been carried to the undertaker's parlor down the street. Tex left Art Barrett and King Olin to cool their heels impatiently while he helped Karen Lantry make arrangements for the funeral of her father.

Reese remained in the Tejano. Now and then he looked out the window to watch Art and King pace up and down before the brick jail. At last Tex and Karen came out on the street. The girl was weeping, but she quickly checked her tears.

Tex helped her into the buckboard. Reese watched her say something and her head came up proudly. Tex flushed and replied but the girl shook her head. She backed the team, wheeled the buckboard and drove out of town, slender back straight, chin out at a fighting angle. A real girl, Reese thought, and he couldn't blame Tex Gage for being interested in her.

Tex crossed the street to the jail, disappeared inside with Art and King. Reese returned to the bar, ordered a drink, and let it remain untouched on the bar before him. His dark eyes looked unseeing at the big mirror, but he was thinking deeply. In the short time since he had ridden into Quilado, he had already learned many little things that had a direct bearing on the case.

The Barretts and the Arrow B were evidently hated by the rest of the ranchers. Though the Arrow B claimed its land titles to be correct, depending on the justice of the courts to support it, yet the Barretts had gathered a ring of gunhawks. Nick Mosely, one of them, was the low, killer type. King Olin was a gunslammer, too, but of a much more intelligent, dangerous kind. And the Barrets had power, power enough to make the local judge accept Barrett's word that Mosely had shot Ray Lantry in self-defense.

"Looks as though the colonel sent us just in time," Reese told himself. "One murder already, and it may set the whole range at war."

HE SIGHED and downed his drink. Nick Mosely came out of the jail, sided by Art Barrett and King Olin. The squat gunhawk walked stiff-backed, hand brushing his holster, a smile of triumph on his swarthy face. Reese watched the three men swing into saddle and neck-rein their horses. They rode out of Quilado with arrogance in the very set of their shoulders.

Not long after, Sheriff Tex Gage came into the Tejano. Lines of worry creased his forehead and he sighed deeply as he came to the bar and ordered. He tossed down the drink and turned to Reese.

"I reckon you and me had better have a talk."

"No time like now," Reese agreed soberly. "I'm riding out to the Arrow B and when I let them know who I am and what I'm doing here I'll probably get their version of the trouble here. The other ranchers will have another side of the picture to show. As a lawman, you should see the arguments pro and con."

"Don't depend on me bein' too fair." Tex shook his head and spoke honestly. "I never much cared for Art and Tom Barrett, and my pa was a small rancher hisself. On top of that, I think a heap of Karen Lantry."

"I understand," Reese said and smiled. "I like a man who lays his cards on the table. Let's set down and you can tell me what you know."

Tex picked up the bottle and glasses from the bar and followed Reese to a table across the room. They sat down and spoke in low tones. The bartender was out of earshot, rattling bottles and glasses, and he made no effort to eavesdrop. Tex went into his story at once.

"When this part of the country was first settled," he said, "there was a family named Muron. They come over from Spain where they was big frogs, and I reckon the king gave 'em about half of New Mexico and a fourth of Texas."

"Spanish grant," Reese said. "I've run into them before."

"That's it. Well, the Murons established a big main ranch here in Quilado. When Mexico broke away from Spain, the Murons lost some of their holdin's in Texas—they was on the wrong side of the fence in that fracas. But they still managed to hold onto twenty square leagues of as fine a graze as yuh'll find anywhere."

"That's a lot of land."

"Like I said," Tex agreed, "the Murons was mighty powerful. They held onto their land up to the time of the Mexican War and the Gadsden Purchase. They still tried to keep their clutches on the title, but twenty square leagues was too big a hunk for Congress to swallow. The whole blamed thing was disallowed."

"Then the holdings were thrown open for homesteading?" Reese asked.

"That's what happened. Of course, the Murons kicked like stuck steers, but that didn't seem to make no difference. They was given a sizable chunk of territory around Quilado and told to whistle for the rest. Naturally, folks filed claims all through here under the Homestead Law and a heap of 'em did it before the land was surveyed. That led to trouble."

"The Barretts?"

"Not yet. Art and Tom ain't showed their hand in the story yet. Nope, when the survey was made, sections was set aside for the railroads bein' built through to the West Coast. Yuh can figger what happened. There was several found they had no title to their spreads. They belonged to the railroads and there wasn't a blame thing they could do about their titles. Most of the ranchers just bought their land over again from the railroads."

"How about the Barretts?" Reese asked.

"I'm gettin' to them." The sheriff waved his hand. "Well, first off the Murons felt they'd lost just about everything when Congress refused to confirm their grant. Like a lot of them high-born Mexicans, they was long on pride and short on cash. They couldn't afford to fight their case clean on up to Washington. So they did the next best thing. They sold their grant and all rights and privileges allowed under it to the Barretts."

"I'm beginnin' to read the trail," Reese said dryly.

"Shore. Art and Tom had plenty of money —and a heap of influence. First thing yuh know, the old Muron grant comes up for a second consideration. Pending decision, there's a survey ordered. Now here's where them Barrets get in their first sidewindin' play. There's a clause in the old grant that ain't exactly clear."

"You've seen the original grant?" Reese asked.

Tex shook his head and poured himself another drink.

"No, but there's been a whole passel of lawyers went over it with a currycomb. It's been quoted in the newspapers and some of the court arguments was printed. Seems most folks say the grant calls for twenty square leagues, but the Barretts read it plumb different. They say it calls for twenty leagues square."

REESE whistled and folded his hands on the table. That made a considerable difference. Tex was silent a moment, staring at the distant batwings. He made a slight gesture with his hand and continued.

"Anyhow, the surveyors come here, headed by a smooth gent named Grant Simpson. Naturally, the Barretts treat them surveyors plumb royal, particularly Simpson. There ain't nothin' on the Arrow B but what he can have for the askin'. Tom and Art wined and dined them men and bring on pretty gals. Yuh'd think that Simpson was the mightiest king in the world the way the Barretts treated him.

"Folks like Lantry, Walt Wythe and Ben Milburn—Aldag, too—tried to talk to Simpson and show him their homestead papers and titles from the railroad company. Simpson just sort of put 'em off, said he knew how to make a survey. He shore did!"

"Twenty leagues square?" Reese asked. Tex nodded glumly.

"That's what he recommended and he put it down on his map that way. Simpson was gone a week before the report was made and we ain't none of us seen him since. Word is that the Barretts paid him thousands of dollars to help their claim. I don't know. Just talk, yuh understand."

"And now?"

"Arrow B has claimed every blamed thing around Quilado. They say homestead and

[*Turn page*]

TOPS FOR QUALITY!

railroad titles ain't no good. The Barrett Land and Cattle Company owns all the land. Of course, they don't want to drive nobody off. Shucks, no! Yuh just pay 'em for yore spread all over again.

"If you don't do that, they'll take the whole matter to court and yuh lose everything yuh got anyhow. They've done tried forcin' folks off and succeeded in a couple of places east of here. That's why King Olin and Nick Mosely and the rest of the gunslammers is on the Arrow B payroll."

"How about Ray Lantry?"

"Ray didn't aim to move until soldiers run him off at bayonet point. He was a stubborn cuss, and I don't blame him. He bought the Box L twice. Payin' the Barretts the third time would ruin him."

"How about rustling?" Reese asked. "I've heard there's beeen some beef killing and drygulching. Who's behind that?"

Tex looked unhappy. He cracked his knuckles and shifted uneasily in his chair. Reese waited patiently.

"I shore don't like to say this, Reese," Tex finally said. "But everything sort of points to Walt Wythe. He's a hot-headed gent, too blamed ready to pull a trigger. No proof, of course, or I would have arrested him long ago. But Wythe has the rest of the small ranchers around him and they figger he's got the right answer. If they make things too hot for the Arrow B, the Barretts might give up. I don't see it that way."

"Neither do I," Reese agreed. "They'll probably push things all the harder."

"I'm the Law in Quilado," Tex said mournfully. "I got to see that law and order is upheld. So far, the Barretts have been in the right every blame time. Now Ray Lantry's been killed, and shore as shootin' Karen will throw in with the small ranchers under Milburn and Wythe. War's goin' to break out, Reese, and the Barretts is smooth enough to stay inside the law. Either I throw away my law badge or I'll have to go after Karen and her friends some day."

"Tough," Reese said.

"Shore—and what would you do if yuh had to go after the girl yuh loved and hoped to marry some day? What would you do, Reese?"

Steve Reese had no answer to that one. He didn't have an immediate answer to the entire situation that confronted him. There was too much conflicting testimony to sift.

After some investigation, he was certain that he and his pards could get to the bottom of the trouble, but that was going to take a lot of time. And danger!

CHAPTER IV

Rifle Rights

SEVERAL hours after Steve Reese had first topped the rise and looked down in Quilado valley, Dusty Trail drew rein at the self-same spot. He rolled the stub of a cigar around in his thick lips and his sleepy eyes considered the valley below. He saw a small cluster of buildings between himself and Quilado.

"That spread looks small enough," he said. "Just about the right size."

He touched spurs lightly and ambled slowly down the slope and onto the valley floor. He rode with shoulders slouched, eyes half-open, body swaying to the easy rhythm of the horse. In about an hour he came to a side road where a canted sign read "Rafter M." Dusty turned down the trail.

It topped a small swell and Dusty saw the ranch just ahead. The house was neat, the yard clean. A saddled horse stood near the corral, reins dropped over its head. The bunkhouse seemed empty but there was a cheerful whistling from the cookshack. Barns, corral, all the buildings were kept in good repair and carried a clean coat of whitewash. Dusty ambled into the yard. The cook came to the door.

"Howdy," he said, and there was something cold and withdrawn in his tone. He was an oldster with a straggly, walrus mustache and a skin like wrinkled old leather. Beady black eyes were sharp and penetrating as they looked at Dusty.

"Howdy," Dusty said affably. He waited a moment and then looked faintly surprised and hurt. "Ain't yuh askin' me to light and rest my saddle?"

"Depends," the cook said sharply.

"Depends on what?"

"On where yuh're from and what yuh aim to do."

"This is shore a blamed unhospitable country," Dusty complained but the cook showed no signs of relenting. "My handle's Dusty Trail and I come from over yonderly."

"Aimin' for what?"

"Mostly for a small spread. I heard there was some good homestead land up this way and I come for a look-see."

The cook stared at him a moment, then

started to laugh. He slapped his thigh and doubled over. Dusty watched him in surprise, faint anger showing on his stubby face. The ranchhouse door opened and a man came out on the stoop.

"What's wrong, Flapjack?" he asked the cook. "Who's this gent?"

"He — wants to — get a—homestead!" "Flapjack" laughed, pointing a long arm at Dusty. "He heard there was—land—here!"

"Light and rest yoreself, stranger," the man on the stoop said. "I'm Ben Milburn, owner of the spread here."

Flapjack wandered back to the cookshack and his rocking laughter could be heard even after he had disappeared inside. Dusty swung out of saddle, dropping the reins over the horse's head. He used the action to cover his quick, close scrutiny of Ben Milburn.

He saw a man a shade under six feet. Milburn at one time had been handsome but care had scored his long, tanned cheeks and furrowed the high forehead. Still, there was a ruggedness about the chin and a firm set to the mouth that was likable. His eyes were set wide apart, brown and grave. His black hair, roached back, was touched with gray at the temples.

The shoulders were slightly rounded but the rest of the slim, muscled body showed no mark of the years. Large, capable hands rested on his gun-belt, the thumbs hooked in under the buckle. On the whole, Dusty decided that Milburn had passed the first inspection and years of making quick, snap judgments had given the range detective an uncanny ability to read character. Dusty circled the horse and walked toward the steps.

"Is yore cook plumb loco?" he demanded in an aggrieved tone.

Milburn smiled faintly and shook his head.

"No more'n any cook. Come inside and we can talk. I didn't catch yore handle."

"Dusty Trail. If what Cooky said was true, I've shore rode a blind trail."

Milburn said nothing, but held open the door and Dusty entered. The room was large, and spotlessly clean. Dark furniture was accented against the light walls. A man looked up from a horsehair sofa, giving Dusty a quick glance, one filled with sudden suspicion. Milburn jerked his thumb toward the man on the sofa.

"Dusty Trail, meet Walt Wythe. He can tell yuh plenty about homestead lands in these parts. Trail rode in from—" Milburn checked and looked inquiringly at Dusty.

"Tascosa," Dusty said hastily. "Heard about Quilado way up there."

WALT WYTHE rubbed his lantern jaw and his flecked green eyes studied Dusty's guileless face. Wythe's nose was long and came to a point, where the sun had peeled the skin. His lips were wide and thin, inclined to be loose. They constantly quirked into a cynical grin that Wythe obviously believed was a friendly smile. His forehead was high and sloped inward toward the crown of his skull. His head was not pointed but, at first glance, it appeared to be.

The skull seemed too heavy for the scrawny neck that disappeared into the soiled shirt that covered a flat chest. His arms were long, the hands big. He wore blue levis topped by a heavy-looped belt. A Peacemaker rode on his skinny thigh. He spoke with a nasal whine.

"Looking for homestead, eh?" he grinned nastily. "Well, yuh best be ridin' on."

"Yuh mean there ain't none to be had?"

"Tell him, Walt," Milburn said heavily. "Rest yore bones, Trail, while yuh listen."

Dusty sat down and Walt Wythe started talking. He outlined the story of the Murons and how the first settlers had filed on what they believed to be open homestead lands. He told of the railroad lands and how the Barretts had moved in with their tremendous claim.

As he spoke, he leaned forward. His green eyes glittered wickedly and his skinny arms made wide, disjointed gestures. His lips writhed with curses now and then. Dusty decided that here was a man corroded with hate.

This man might have right on his side but that made him all the more dangerous. He would kill without the least compunction, with no thought of the law, driven by the acid bite of his personality. Walt Wythe would bear plenty of watching, Dusty decided.

"So there's yore blasted homestead chances," Walt said at last, throwing himself back against the sofa. "There ain't no land except what the Barretts might sell to yuh. When yuh buy from them, yuh buy land that some pore jasper has sweat and bled for, only to lose."

Dusty looked around at Milburn who gravely nodded.

"I reckon Walt has just about called the brand, Trail. My own Rafter M here is in the limits of the Muron grant as the Barretts claim it."

"Yuh mean yuh'll have to buy it all over again?"

"Or move," Milburn added and sighed. "Either way I stand to lose all I've ever put

into this ranch, not only money but years of hard work."

Dusty stared down at the floor for a long time, then he scratched his head.

"But what can yuh do about it? Don't seem right no ways."

"It ain't," Walt spat, "and there's plenty can be done as I see it. We're squatters, the Barretts say. Well, I've heard of squatters' wars before. It can happen again."

"That ain't the answer." Milburn shook his head.

Walt snorted contemptuously.

"That's what yuh say now, but wait until King Olin rides in the yard there some fine mornin' with all his gunhawks. He'll order yuh off yore own place and have a legal paper to make it stick. What then, Ben Milburn?"

The rancher shook his head slightly but said nothing in reply. Walt Wythe's arguments had a dangerous amount of truth in them. Dusty looked from one man to the other. Wythe again leaned forward, long, gnarled finger pointing at Dusty.

"When jaspers like the Barretts steal everything yuh got, there's only one right a man can stand on." He slapped his holster. "Six-gun law and rifle rights! Was the Barretts driven out of Quilado, then yuh could have yore homestead spread, Trail. Yuh can still get it that way if yuh throw in with us."

"War?" Dusty asked.

Walt Wythe nodded grimly.

"War," he repeated and his flecked eyes glowed. "Throw in yore guns with us squatters, Trail, and yuh can have yore choice of the Quilado country. It's in a right cause since them Barretts is the ones that want to starve and gun us out. Throw in, Trail."

"I shore would like to have my own spread," Dusty said slowly. Wythe mistook his meaning, as Dusty had thought he would. The man jumped up, grabbed Dusty's hand pumped it.

"I knowed yuh was a man! When you comin' in, Ben? We need the Rafter M. Yuh got more at stake than Trail here. He's got his yet to get."

"I'm not shore, Walt," Milburn said hesitantly. "Mebbe yuh're right. But fightin' always gets out of hand. I don't know."

"You better make up yore mind quick," Wythe snapped. "We're gettin' organized. Do yuh want to be left out in the cold?"

Milburn's eyes flashed.

"I'm not going to be forced into anything, Walt. "I'll make up my own mind, an' take my own good time doing it."

Wythe's lips twisted in a sneer.

"I ain't pushin' nobody. But act fast."

CHAPTER V

Arrow B

HANK BALL had cut away from Reese and Dusty, heading into Quilado Valley from another direction. For a time he had ridden through a rough, pine-forested country and then he struck a road that lead directly toward the valley. He cuffed his hat back on his head and settled himself for a long ride. His way lead upward to a small saddle between two high ridges and then dipped into Quilado.

He was north of the town and not far from the Arrow B, if he recalled the map that Colonel Beauvine had shown them. He had ridden for close to an hour when he rounded a small hummock and came face to face with another man. Instantly the man drew up, hand dropping to clear his six, from it's holster eying Hank with a deep suspicion.

"Howdy," Hank said affably, ignoring the gun. "I'm lookin' for the Arrow B."

"Gunhawk?" the man spat the question.

Hank's eyes narrowed. The man he had run across was of medium build but with abnormally wide and chunky shoulders, topping a barrel chest. His face was square, accented by the bone formation at the corner of the jaws. The gray eyes were level and direct. Hank shrugged.

"That's as may be, amigo. The name's Hank Ball. I come from over yonder. I'm lookin' for the Arrow B. I figgered on a civil answer."

The man blinked his eyes, but the suspicion didn't leave his face. He shrugged slightly and jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"Arrow B's down the road a spell—mebbe four mile yuh'll see the turn-off. Any lone rider askin' for the Arrow B is generally a gunslammer. Still don't know but what yuh ain't."

"My business is my own," Hank said shortly, "and I still ain't heard yore brand—or why yuh want me to read my pedigree."

"Name's Bob Aldag, owner of the Runnin' A brand. I figger before long I'll tangle with Arrow B, and I like to know who draws gun wages there. Satisfied?"

"Plumb," Hank answered affably, "and thanks for the directions. Adios."

He circled Adag, a reckless smile hovering on his lips. The rancher twisted around, hand still holding his gun low, as Hank passed him and continued on up the road. At last Aldag called.

"Hey! Yuh didn't answer my question."

"Don't intend to," Hank called back over his shoulder. "Might see yuh over a gunsight some time. Buenos dias."

He waved his hand and presented his broad back to Aldag.

A turn of the road hid him and Hank grinned. If he was to play the part of a wandering gunhawk on the shady side of the law, he might as well play it all the way. He had hardly been able to check the start of surprise when he learned that the chance stranger was Bob Aldag. If Aldag talked about a new gunny in Quilado, it would sooner or later come to the Arrow B and strengthen the story Hank himself intended to tell.

After a while he came to the Arrow B sign burned deep and black in a fence post. He took the side road, whistling loud and cheerfully. Slowly the miles dropped behind him and Hank began actually to realize how large the Arrow B spread was. He had just begun to wonder if he would have to camp for the night when he caught the gleam of the distant buildings in the setting sun.

The ranch was big, the main house a low, sprawling hacienda type building. The corral was large and several fine horses pricked up their ears as Hank came through the yard gate. Cattle pens extended beyond the big barn. The cookshack was large and the bunkhouse was the biggest Hank had ever seen.

Some men loafed in the yard, hard-eyed gents who wore their sixes with the flair of the professional. One of them walked swiftly to the ranchhouse, opened the door and called to someone inside.

The men came slowly toward Hank and by the time he had swung out of saddle they had formed a silent ring around him. His glance swung from one to the other. Each man had the harsh-jawed, tight look of the fighter. Thin lips were pressed in straight, hard lines. Hank's grin grew wider and he held up his hands.

"Plumb peaceful," he chuckled.

"Don't be so blasted funny!" one of the men said flatly. His eyes looked mean. Hank's face flushed and he jerked down his arms. A man pushed through the ring, hard, black eyes fixed on Hank.

"I'm Tom Barrett," he announced. "What's yore business here?"

DUSTY TRAIL

He was tall and dark, with piercing black eyes that were close-set and narrow. His mouth was wide, but the lips were thin, the upper one overly long. High bones accented the long flat angle of the cheeks, making his face seem pointed, sharp, a touch cruel. He wore a dark shirt of good material and his black trousers were thrust into short boots.

"Lookin' for a job mostly," Hank answered. Tom Barrett's eyes traveled over him from dusty boots to almost shapeless hat.

"Where yuh from?"

"Big Bend country. Got plumb tired of buttes and sand, and the Rio Grande."

"Ranchin'—punchin' cows?" Barrett asked quickly.

Hank grinned. "Let's say I was a cattle dealer. I sold Texas beef to the Mexicans, and Mexican beef to the Tejanos. Just kept crossin' the river all the time."

A GHOST of a smile hovered around Barrett's thin lips but didn't get into his voice.

"Day or night?" he asked.

"Night, mostly. I always liked to handle cattle in the dark. Some jaspers didn't like my habits, so I left the Big Bend. Heard there was always a job at the Arrow B if I had the right talents."

"This ain't an owlhoot spread," Tom said sharply.

"Reckon it ain't, but it's a big one," Hank said easily. "I reckon there's always trouble on a ranch like this. Heap of folks try to pick up beef, say, when yuh ain't lookin'. I got a cure for that." He patted his holster.

"Can yuh use it?" Barrett demanded.

Hank looked around at the silent gunhawks and shrugged.

"Mebbe not as good as some around here, but I ain't never let a six grow rusty."

Tom Barrett shifted his weight, and once again his hard eyes traveled over Hank. He hesitated for a moment, then made up his mind.

"Yuh're hired," he said. "Gun wages—and yuh might earn 'em." He singled out one of the hands and nodded. "Snake," he ordered, "fix him up in the bunkhouse and show him the ropes. Come up to the house after yuh're settled, Ball, so I can enter yuh on the payroll."

He turned sharply on his heel and a way opened for him through the ring of men. Tom's decision was fully accepted by his men. They wandered back to the bunkhouse, except for "Snake," a pinched-faced, stubble-jawed renegade, the mark of the owlhoot indelibly stamped on his ugly features. He jerked his thumb toward the corral, into which Hank turned his horse. In the bunkhouse, after that, he dumped his bedroll on the bunk assigned to him. Then Snake told him to report to Tom Barrett at the ranchhouse.

From the moment Hank stepped into the hacienda, he got a feeling of the wealth and power the place represented. It showed in the spacious halls and rooms of the house, even in the office where Tom Barrett waited for him.

Hank sat on the edge of a chair while Tom worked at a roll-top mahogany desk. On the walls were pictures of the Barretts and the ranch. A deep-pile rug covered the floor. Through a wide window Hank could look directly out onto the yard.

Tom Barrett wrote Hank's name in a book, stated briefly the rate of pay, outlined a few of the ranch rules. He closed the book and leaned back in his chair.

"King Olin is segundo here," he said, "and will be yore boss. Any orders from King, my brother Art, or myself are to be obeyed without question. Yuh might be called on to use that gun—yuh might not."

"Sounds fair enough to me," Hank said, "and the pay is shore right."

"Mebbe yuh've heard stories about the Arrow B and Quilado," Tom said. "We're not a renegade outfit. We don't go out of our way for trouble. We just ask for what rightly belongs to us and there's some who don't see it our way. They cause trouble and we've got to be ready for it. That's why yuh're hired."

Hank grinned, said nothing.

Tom's fingers rippled a rhythm on the edge of the desk.

"Are yuh wanted by the law anywhere?" he asked.

Hank's smile vanished and his face became tight.

"I told yuh where I come from and what I did. That's enough for any man to know. I can always ride on somewheres else if folks get too curious."

"Fair enough, Ball. What we don't know won't hurt us. It gives us a loophole if the law ever asks us why we kept yuh." Abruptly Tom twisted toward the window as three men rode into the yard. "There's Art and King now. They'll be wantin' to take a look at yuh."

The three men swung out of saddle and disappeared around a corner of the house. In a moment, Hank heard their steps in the hallway, then the door opened and Art Barrett came bursting in. King Olin trailed close behind him, while Nick Mosely remained close to the door.

"Had a little trouble, Tom," Art started, then he saw Hank and stopped short.

Tom made the introductions which Art briefly acknowledged. King Olin coolly sized up Hank and extended his hand. Art swung around to his brother.

"We had a little trouble in town. Nick was in jail for a while on a murder charge. Judge Colmar ordered his release."

"Squatters again?" Tom asked.

Art nodded. "That's right, and a nosy stranger who happened to be in the Tejano when it happened. He got the drop on Nick, Breck and Joe. Had 'em lined up against the wall when Gage walked in to find out what the shootin' was about. Gage took the stranger's word. . . . Tom, Quilado needs a new sheriff, one more to our likin'."

"Nick did the killin' though?" Tom asked.

"Shore." Art grinned. "And we got one less squatter to worry about. Of course, his daughter will probably raise ructions."

"Daughter!" Tom exclaimed. His hands gripped the edge of the desk until his knuckles showed white. He glared from Art to Nick, and licked his lips. "Who did he shoot?"

"Ray Lantry."

TOM left the desk and chair as though springs had thrown him forward. Before Nick Mosely could move, Tom's swinging fist landed flush in his face and the man went down. Tom's hand slashed down to his gun and the heavy weapon seemed to fairly jump from leather. It lined down toward Nick's prone form.

King Olin grabbed wildly for Tom's gun arm, but the owner of the Arrow B avoided him. Hank stepped in from the other side. His strong fingers grabbed Tom's wrist and, with a quick, twisting motion, he had the man's hand high up behind his back. Tom threshed helplessly, cursing and raving. Art stepped in and wrenched the gun away while King helped Hank hold Tom.

"Yuh fool!" Art blazed. "Yuh crazy, locoed fool!"

"Ray Lantry!" Tom roared. "I told all of yuh to leave the Box L alone. That girl and her father wasn't to be touched. Art, yuh doublecrossed me!"

"Shut up, Tom," Art snapped. "Watch what yuh're sayin'."

Nick moaned and came to his feet, his nose streaming blood. He swayed for a moment, then leaned against the wall, head low. Tom's black eyes blazed with a killing light.

"Get him out of here, King," Art said, jerking his head toward Nick.

King released Tom, though Hank and Art kept a tight grip on him. The segundo led Nick out into the hall and closed the door. Suddenly the tension left Tom Barrett and his shoulders slumped. Art looked at Hank and jerked his head toward the door.

"That's all. Tom will be all right now. I'll see yuh later. King Olin will want to talk to yuh right away."

Hank released his grip on Tom's arm. The man sank into a chair, rubbing his aching muscles. Hank hesitated, then at Art's swift gesture left the room. He hurried down the hall and outside. King and Nick stood in the yard, the swarthy gunhawk cursing through the dripping blood. King spoke soothingly.

"Keep yore shirt on, Nick. Shore, he hit yuh and yuh'll get a chance to pay him back some day. Won't be long, neither, unless yuh upset our plans. The Barretts ain't got a chance—" He broke off short when he realized Hank was close. "Nick, here's the gent that saved yore life."

Nick looked up, scowling. He mumbled a few words of thanks and walked off toward the bunkhouse. King watched him go, then turned to Hank. Once again he sized up the new hand.

"Yuh move mighty fast, Ball. Where'd yuh learn it?"

"Big Bend country, runnin' back and forth across the river."

"So!" King exclaimed softly and a new, calculating light came in his eyes. "Know a heap about brandin', I reckon."

"A little." Hank smiled. "Mexican brands take a heap of workin' over sometimes."

"Ball, I think you'll do right well on the Arrow B. A smart man can make a heap more'n his wages if he puts his mind to it."

"I'm willin'," Hank said readily.

King laughed and punched Hank's ribs with his thumb. "Play with King Olin, Ball. Yuh'll get along."

He turned and walked off toward his own cottage. Hank watched him go. Suddenly the iron triangle at the cookshack shattered the twilight peace. Hank jerked, startled out of his thoughts. He looked at the light in the Barrett office and then toward King Olin's shack.

"Now what kind of a doublecross is shapin' up here?" he asked himself.

CHAPTER VI

Evasion

REESE saw Hank Ball among the men by the bunkhouse the instant he rode into the Arrow B yard. The redhead advanced with the rest of the gunhawks and formed a silent ring around him while one of their number went to the ranchhouse to announce the stranger.

Tom Barrett came out. He glanced at first only briefly at Reese, then his eyes circled the gunhawks. A look of disappointment flitted over his face. Nick Mosely was not in the ring. Tom's attention once more centered on Reese.

"You certainly call out a reception committee," Reese said easily, motioning toward the ring of men.

"That's just in case we don't like the shape of yore face," Tom snapped.

Steve Reese's brows arched and his lips flattened. "Afraid of trouble?" he asked.

"Might be," Tom answered. "What's yore business here?"

"CPA," Reese answered.

He instantly felt the tension in the men.

A few moved their hands closer to their guns, a sure indication that some of them had ridden the owlhoot trails. Tom's scowl left his face.

"Then you must be Steve Reese," he said. "Come on in the house."

Reese swung out of the saddle and followed Tom. Behind him, the men watched, some scowling and uncertain. Hank Ball moved unconcernedly back to the bench before the bunkhouse, but he missed none of the expressions of the men, nor their whispered curses or comments.

"A blasted badge-toter!" Snake growled under his breath. "I reckon somebody shore slipped mighty bad that time."

Inside the ranchhouse Reese followed Tom down a long hall and into the office. King Olin sat lolling in a chair while Art Barrett worked at the desk. Both men looked up and instantly recognized Reese. Art came to his feet, his dark face twisting in fury.

"Yuh're the meddler in Quilado!" he accused. "Yuh're the hombre who had Nick jailed!"

"Raise 'em, hombre," King said quietly. "I been plannin' some way to meet you."

Reese checked, arms hanging easily at his side. He glanced coolly from the gun in King Olin's hand to Art's blazing eyes. Tom stared from his brother to his segundo.

"What's wrong with you locoed mavericks!" he demanded. "This is Steve Reese, the man the CPA sent in answer to my letter."

Art Barrett jerked around to face his brother. He started to speak, changed his mind, and his lips snapped shut. He sank down in his chair and made a gesture toward King.

"Put up the six, King. Looks like we need a new shuffle and deal." He shot a glance at Reese. "So you're the CPA lawman!"

Reese nodded coldly and displayed his badge. He presented his letter from Colonel Beauvine to Tom Barrett, who read it and passed it to Art. Art dropped the sheet on the desk, leaned back and steepled his long fingers.

"I suppose Tex Gage filled yuh with a bunch of twisted tales about the Arrow B since yesterday afternoon," he said. "That trouble in the Tejano put us in a bad light."

"That's right." Reese nodded. "But I never make decisions until I hear both sides of the question. What's yore story?"

"It's simple enough," Art replied. He lowered his hands and smiled, shrugging his shoulders. "Naturally, what was I to believe when two of my own men told me Nick had not started the trouble. I didn't know you, nor about yore credentials. If I had, I might not have been so quick to accept Breck's and Joe's story."

"It was still murder," Reese said.

Art flinched and his mouth set in a hard line for a fleeting instant. Then a look of regret showed on his dark, pointed face.

"Nick left some time in the night," he said. "I apologize for what I said yesterday, Reese. Yuh should have identified yoreself."

"There was too many around, Barrett. But what about Nick Mosely?"

"We'll make every effort to get him and turn him over to the law. Tell the boys to watch for him, King."

"They'll shore throw down on Nick if they see him," King said firmly. "I reckon we made a bad mistake, boss."

"That's right, King. You understand, Reese, that Nick is inclined to be quarrelsome and touchy, particular when he's had a few drinks. The Arrow B has had some trouble with Ray Lantry over land titles, but we're willin' for the courts to decide our claim in a legal manner. Nick just got mean and his loyalty to the Arrow B caused the rest."

"If I ever find him," Tom spoke up, "he won't live to stand trial."

ART glanced at his brother, but said nothing. Reese didn't allow his thoughts to show. He knew that Art was lying, that the man knew the whereabouts of Nick Mosely. So did King Olin, despite the gunhawk's smooth assurance that the Arrow B crew would look for the killer. Reese was not so sure about Tom. He had a feeling that Art used a few hidden cards on his brother. Art was all friendliness as he looked at Tom.

"Yuh'd better tell Reese what we want, Tom," he said. "It was yore letter that brought him."

Tom hitched forward.

"Yuh probably know about our claim to Quilado lands," he said to Reese. "I wrote to the CPA and a man can't be in town overnight without hearing of it. Naturally, the ranchers feel pretty mean about it. Art and I understand that, but we want what rightly belongs to us."

"Land titles are something for a lawyer," Reese answered. "I wouldn't attempt to decide that for you."

"We don't expect yuh to." Tom shook his head. "But somebody is killin' our beef and runnin' off more. Our men are sniped at on Arrow B land all the time. We think

it's the squatters tryin' to frighten us into givin' up our claims."

"That might be," Reese agreed.

"So, we want you to get the sneakin' gents behind the bushwhackin' and rustlin'. Yuh can go out and arrest Walt Wythe, Ben Milburn and Bob Aldag right now as a starter."

"On what proof?" Reese demanded.

Tom drew up straight.

"Because Art and I know blame well they're the only ones behind this," he said positively. "They're the ones who have spreads on land that rightly belongs to Arrow B. Yuh got my word for it—and Art's. Milburn, Wythe and Aldag hate us and would do anything to hit back at us. The local sheriff won't take any action. His sympathies are with the squatters. So I had you called in to do the job."

Reese smiled and shook his head.

"You've got the wrong idea of the CPA, Barrett. We don't hire guns or a badge to the highest bidder. I've never yet placed a man behind bars or in a hangnoose on suspicion alone. I must have proof."

"Yuh doubt my word?" Tom blazed.

"No," Reese answered readily. "I admit yuh might be right. But that's not proof. Had yuh thought that there might be an easy way to end all this trouble?"

"What?" Art demanded sharply.

"Why not reach a compromise with these small ranchers? You're claiming a lot of territory and you've made a lot of enemies. It might cost you more in money and blood than the land will be worth."

"Blasted if I do!" Art's hand smacked down on the desk.

His brother paced to the window, stared out in the yard for a moment and then turned to face Art.

"Mebbe he's right, Art. Mebbe we've bit off a heap more than we can chew. It's costin' us already. Look at our payroll, and I just hired another man yesterday."

"We bought the Muron Grant, didn't we?" Art demanded coldly. Tom nodded and Art's hand again smacked down on the desk. "All right, then. What's ours, we keep. We get it back from these blasted squatters or they pay us the full value. You and I agreed to that, Tom, when we first went into this business."

"Shucks, it's the sensible thing," King Olin put in. "Did I own that grant, I'd shore make them greasy sack outfits pay up or get off—and pronto!"

"That's the way I feel," Art said. Tom said nothing but the slight shrug of his shoulders told of his surrender. Art swung around to

HANK BALL

Reese. "Yuh know how we stand, and that's final. The range is ours by right. We intend to get it."

"You had a survey made," Reese said.

"Asked the Government for it when we made a claim on the Muron Grant. They sent the best surveyor obtainable—Grant Simpson. He confirmed our claim."

"To twenty square leagues?" Reese demanded.

Art's eyes narrowed and his voice dropped.

"You know a great deal about our business," he commented.

"It's a matter of newspaper and court record," Reese said, "and I have to know something about it if I'm handling this case.

"Simpson recommended that we be given twenty leagues square, as it called for in the Muron document," informed Art Barrett.

"There was an argument about that," Reese insisted. "I'd like to see the original grant."

Art leaned back and considered Reese carefully. Tom's eyes shifted to his brother's and some unspoken warning seemed to pass between them. Art smiled regretfully.

"The old grant is a mighty valuable document, Reese," he finally said. "Naturally, we

don't keep it here. It's in a bank vault in Santa Fe. But I've got a sworn copy of Simpson's map and recommendations to the US Land Office and to the Surveyor-General. I think that'll be authority enough."

REESE did not argue the point and waited patiently while Art opened a small safe in the corner and produced a heavy folded document. He first showed Simpson's affidavits to the accuracy of the survey. Then came Simpson's statement of the terms of the Muron grant. Art unfolded the map and Reese bent over it.

At a single glance he saw that the Barretts claimed a goodly share of the southeast section of New Mexico. Within the area of the grant were many ranches, most of them small. The town of Quilado and three or four lesser towns were also within the area. He swept his hand across the map.

"And you plan on making your title good to all that?"

"Every blamed square inch of it," Art said forcefully.

Tom nodded. Reese straightened and sighed.

"You've cut yourself out a job."

"And we expect you to do yore share," Art snapped. "If yuh won't take our word that Milburn, Wythe and Aldag are behind the rustlin' and bushwhackin', yuh can at least find out who is. We shore expect definite action, at any rate."

"You're entitled to it as members of the CPA," Reese answered coldly. "I'll see that the guilty ones are caught and jailed."

"Yuh can use the Arrow B as headquarters," Tom spoke up quickly. "We'll help all we can."

"Thanks," Reese answered. He looked straight at Art Barrett and then at King Olin. "I'll be doing a lot of riding around and asking questions. I want that understood."

"All yuh want," Art answered readily, though King Olin looked somewhat displeased.

"If I should happen to run into Nick Mosely," Reese went on, "I'm taking him to jail in Quilado. And this time with my testimony, the judge won't issue a release writ."

Art's fist doubled at his side and then slowly relaxed. A sly smile twisted his thin lips.

"Do what yuh think best, Reese," he said smoothly. "Now I'll show yuh to yore room and yuh can start on yore investigation any time yuh please. Just remember, we want results."

Ten minutes later, Reese stood alone in a large and airy bedroom. And as he looked out a grilled window into an elaborate patio his strong fingers drummed on the stuccoed sill, and his black eyes were hard and glittering.

Art Barrett, he was thinking, was both smooth and sly. He had easily slid around the arrest and release of Nick Mosely, but he certainly had lied when he had claimed there was little more to Lantry's killing than the misplaced loyalty of a drunken and belligerent cowboy. He had lied when he had claimed that Mosely had ridden away in the night. Somewhere on the vast Arrow B land, the killer was in hiding until the time was right for him to appear again.

Reese also remembered the way in which Art had evaded producing the original land grant. Reese wondered why the man should be reluctant to show the document, and make the claim that it wasn't available.

Then Reese turned his thoughts to Tom Barrett, and to the differences, though slight, perhaps, in some ways between him and Art. For one thing, it was plain that Tom honestly wanted Nick Mosely caught and tried for the murder of Ray Lantry. Art did not. Why?

But on one point the Barrett brothers saw eye to eye. They intended to make the Muron Grant stick if it tore up the whole Quilado district and started a bloody range war. That motive stood behind their hiring of gunhawks and renegades. In fact, it looked to the CPA field chief as if the Barretts would prefer a war, since they would be powerful enough to crush any opposition. Reese turned thoughtfully from the window.

"There'll be gunsmoke in plenty before this business is over," he told himself grimly.

Reese stayed the rest of the day at the Arrow B spread. Some of his time he spent in the bunkhouse where the men eyed him suspiciously and answered his questions in surly monosyllables. Reese treated Hank as distantly as he did the rest, and the redhead himself muttered vague threats against the "cussed snoopin' lawman."

Reese ate supper with the Barretts, and found it to be a sumptuous repast. The Chinese cook was excellent and two Mexican women served the table silently and efficiently. At last Reese leaned back, satiated with good food.

"Learn anything?" Art asked easily then, for they had not discussed business during the meal.

Reese shook his head. "Not much," he said. "Except that most of your hands spend

their time loafing, and none of them are local men.

"Our workin' hands are out with the beef or at the line camps," Art explained with rather elaborate carelessness. "Many of 'em are Quilado men, but we picked 'em. The boys you saw here were—just in case of trouble."

"Your payroll must be tremendous," Steve Reese said thoughtfully.

"We can meet it," Art answered sharply and then he smiled. "We can meet most anything that comes along, Reese," he said meaningly.

"I can see that," Reese answered gravely, "and that may be your mistake in this deal. The man who figures that money and power solves everything generally runs into trouble sooner or later."

"We'll take the chance," Art declared, and laughed.

CHAPTER VII

The Raiders

NEXT morning Reese saddled up and rode northward over the Arrow B range. He had the aimless air of a man who was riding without definite purpose.

Well away from the ranchhouse, he drew rein and, for a long time, watched his back trail. Satisfied that no one was following him, he touched with his blunted spurs and cut sharply to the right.

Late in the afternoon he crossed the Arrow B line fence, though the Barrett claim continued on for many miles. At the moment the land beyond the fence was called part of the Running A spread, owned by Bob Aldag. Reese came upon some beef bearing the Aldag brand, heavy whitefaces that would bring a good price at the market. A short while later he rode down a long slope and into the Running A yard.

At the sound of his approach, a man appeared in the wide barn doors and walked over to Reese as the CPA man drew rein. Level gray eyes swept over the rider, held a moment on the holstered gun-belts, then jumped back to the stranger's face. The man's square jaws bunched a little but his voice was calm as he said:

"Howdy. Lookin' for somebody?"

"For Bob Aldag," Reese answered.

The man's gray eyes didn't so much as flicker.

"Friend of his'n?" the ranchman asked idly.

"Not exactly." Reese smiled. "But it seems that this Bob Aldag wrote to a gent named Beauvine in Austin, Texas, not long ago. And I was sent out to talk to him about that letter."

The man extended a big hand and his grave face broke in a smile.

"Yuh're the CPA man," he said. "I'm shore glad yuh come. I'm Bob Aldag."

Reese's brows arched.

"Suspicious of strangers, aren't you?"

Aldag flushed.

"Shore—especially them that wears twin guns. There's too cussed many Arrow B killers ridin' around loose and the Barretts that own that spread wouldn't hesitate none to get me out of the way. They got Ray Lantry yesterday in town."

"I know about that." Reese nodded and slid out of saddle. "I had a long talk with Sheriff Tex Gage about the Barretts and their land claim."

"Thievin' coyotes!" Aldag snorted, and his face grew grim. "I reckon they're killers at heart. Best come inside and we can talk a spell about things."

Steve Reese's black eyes missed nothing as he walked toward the small neat ranchhouse. Barn and corral also were small. The bunkhouse looked as if it sheltered not more than half a dozen men. But plainly, the Running A was a prosperous spread if it was small. The interior of the house was as spotless as the outside, but it lacked the woman's touch. Aldag clearly was a bachelor.

Aldag made the field chief comfortable in the boxlike living room and immediately launched into a recital of his troubles. Most of them concerned the land grant and the Barretts, and were facts Reese already knew. But he let Aldag have his say. At last the rancher finished and sank back in his chair, almost breathless.

"Somethin's got to be done about it!" Aldag exclaimed. "And blamed soon! The Barretts will drive us all out of house and home, one way or the other. If they can't do it legal, they'll use them gunslammers on their payroll. I shore expect trouble any day."

"It is a serious situation all right," Reese admitted. "I've already done some investigating, Aldag. Also, from what I've learned, it seems as if there's been some rustling and

cattle shooting—Arrow B beef. And I've heard that Arrow B hands have been bushwhacked a couple of times."

"I reckon there's been things like that happen," Aldag said, a little uneasily, "but I ain't had a hand in 'em. I figger I can fight legal-like or not at all. I don't take no stock in underhand tricks. The Barretts can have their beef and I ain't slingin' no lead at 'em. All I want is my own land, clear and free."

REESE sensed the sincerity and truth in the man's voice. Art and Tom Barrett had made a bad mistake when they had included Bob Aldag among the possible rustlers.

"Any idea who might be behind the rustling and bushwhacking?" Reese asked.

Aldag rubbed his jaw and looked shrewdly at the CPA field chief.

"Whose side are you on?" he asked.

Reese laughed.

"Neither side, Aldag, and you wouldn't want me to be. I wear the CPA badge and it stands for fair and honest dealings to all its members. If I took sides, even yours, you would never be certain that I could be trusted. I want the facts and the truth. When I get them, I'll know what to do."

"I like the cut of yore clothes and the sound of yore words," Aldag said emphatically. "Like I said, I take no stock to shootin' or other sidewindin' tricks. There might be them as does, and mebbe I have an idea who one of 'em might be. But if I tell yuh, remember it's only suspicion. I ain't got a speckle of proof."

"I understand," Reese agreed.

"If any of the little ranchers is fightin' back at the Arrow B that way, it'd be Walt Wythe," Aldag said. "At least he leads them that does. Walt's a hot-tempered, mean cuss and he flies off the handle more'n any jasper I know. He's caught like the rest of us by the Barrett claim and he's made his threats."

"But you know of no actual illegal move he's made?"

"Not one, Reese. He's always bellerin' blood and gunsmoke. He hollered around for a Vigilante committee for awhile and then talked about a bunch of night riders, like the Blancos. That's sort of jumpin' into somethin' while yore eyes is shut. No tellin' what'd happen once we started somethin' like that."

"It's bad business," Steve Reese agreed.

"I told 'em as much. Ray Lantry was sort of leanin' that way and Ben Milburn might of swung in with Wythe. But I reckon I said my say a little too strong. Milburn and Lantry held off."

"But there is rustling," Reese insisted.

"So I've heard." Aldag nodded and looked shrewdly at Reese. "But who claims it? Have the Barretts offered proof? Have they offered any proof of bushwhackin'? Not that there ain't, understand—but have they?"

"It looks like Quilado throws a lot of suspicions around, on both sides of the fence," Reese said dryly, "and that always leads to trouble."

Aldag flushed.

"Shore—I know it looks that way. If Art and Tom Barrett got proof, then yuh can start checkin' Wythe. I ain't one to get a man in trouble, but I'm only tellin' yuh the brand as I read it. But what about my land title, Reese?"

"I can't decide on that. The legal department of the CPA is working on it and our lawyers will tell you where you stand."

"That's fair enough. Reese, if yuh can sort of check the trouble here before it gets out of hand, yuh'd be doin' Quilado a favor."

"I'll try," Reese promised, with a smile. Then his dark eyes grew thoughtful.

"Did you tell anyone that you were calling in the CPA?" he asked.

"Well, Ray Lantry and Walt Wythe was puttin' on war paint again, and Walt was pretty hard after me to throw in my boys as gun hands. He had some locoed idea about wipin' out the Arrow B. I shore roweled him and Ray at a meetin' we held.

"I even said it was time we quit edgin' around the law, and that I was callin' in somebody who could handle the thing right. I told 'em about the CPA. Ray and Ben was right off on my side. Walt sort of growled around about wastin' time, but he finally decided to wait to see what yuh could do."

"Well"—Reese arose—"I guess that about covers everything."

Aldag wouldn't hear of Reese leaving. So as long as it was already sundown the CPA field chief decided to stay the night. He could ride back to the Arrow B in the morning, or on to Ben Milburn's spread, which wasn't far away.

Aldag's men were a hard-working honest lot and, in his own mind, Reese gave the Running A brand a clean bill of health. No man there, he was sure, would deliberately break the law. After supper, Reese and Aldag talked for a short while of cattle and the problems of a ranchman, then went to bed.

Reese lay in bed, his active mind busy with the problem he faced. He admitted that so

far he had not made much progress. He had a deep dislike of the Arrow B, brought on by Nick Mosely's actions and Art Barrett's evasions. But dislike proved nothing and might even harm the handling of the case. A man should keep his thoughts impersonal—and it was beginning to be hard to do that.

Reese rolled over. Somewhere close to the yard an owl hooted, and another answered on the opposite side of the house. For a time the sound made no impression on Reese, and then abruptly he realized that there had been a false note. He tensed, listening for a repetition of the call. It didn't come.

A HORSE nickered in the corral and Reese got out of bed. He stood at the darkened window, peering out over the yard, but saw nothing. The Running A slept peacefully on. At last Reese sighed and lay down again.

He did not go fully asleep for a long time but at last he drifted off. He did not know how much time had passed when he snapped wide awake. A gun had blasted out in the yard. Reese's feet hit the floor and instantly he was aware of smoke. It billowed into the room. A gun roared again and someone shouted at the bunkhouse.

Reese jumped to the window. An angry red glow lit the yard and along the fence row spitting tongues of orange flame were slugs thrown toward the bunkhouse. The Running A hands fired back, but Reese saw that they were held inside the building by the fire of the raiders.

Then Reese realized that the red glow was made by fire. He heard an ominuous crackling to the rear of the house. He swung around as Aldag burst in the door, hastily buckling on a gun-belt.

"The house is afire!" Aldag shouted. "We been raided! We got to make a run for it."

Steve Reese jumped for his clothing as Aldag rushed out of the room and toward the front door. Reese heard him jerk the door open and the noise of gunfire increased as more sixes joined in the shooting.

Aldag made no sound. Reese desperately tugged at his boots, ears straining to hear Aldag's return fire. There was none. Then Reese realized that the whole rear of the ranchhouse was ablaze. Smoke made breathing hard and his eyes watered until he was almost blinded.

He ran out of the room. In the short hallway, the smoke was even thicker, shot through with an angry, murky, red glow. The crackling of the flames drowned out everything else. Reese turned almost blindly toward the front room and groped his way along, guided by a draft of cool air. At last his groping fingers touched the open door.

He breathed deeply of clear air and his vision cleared. He saw Bob Aldag's sprawled, silent figure a step or two beyond the porch where raider guns had cut him down. The killers had surrounded the yard and had set the fire. One group had kept the cowhands helpless in the bunkhouse while the rest had made sure that no one in the ranchhouse escaped.

Steve Reese's jaw set in a grim fighting line. His hands dropped to his holsters and the Peacemakers snaked out. If he had to meet Bob Aldag's fate, he would go down fighting. As yet the smoke hid him from the killers beyond the fence, but the moment he stepped clear of the porch their guns would be ready to blast the life from him.

He heard an ominous crackling in the ceiling and realized that tongues of flame had run along the rafters in the roof above. Abruptly the light in the yard increased as the fire broke through the roof and raged into the sky. Guns still blasted and snarled from the bunkhouse but Reese could expect no help from that direction.

His hands curled tightly around his gun butts as he slipped out onto the porch. Some keen-eyed killer must have spotted him for a bullet snarled past his head and thudded into the wall. Instantly he dropped flat. A sheet of lead swept across the porch. Glass crashed, splinters flew as slugs hurtled into the wall. Reese would have been cut to ribbons had he not moved so instantaneously.

He wriggled his way to the far edge of the porch. A sudden billow of smoke encircled him, clawed at his throat, tried to cut off his breath. He had to cough and his eyes were blinded again. A draft of air lifted the smoke but he knew it to be only a temporary reprieve. He faced a grim choice of death by fire, or by the slugs of the hidden killers beyond the fence.

Slowly he gathered his feet under him, as he crouched just behind the rail. There was no movement or sound beyond the fence but Reese knew the raiders waited there. The yard was as light as day and there was no cover.

His muscles tensed and then he straightened, vaulted the rail, and his bootheels thudded into the ground below the porch. He saw the wicked wink of gun flame and his own Peacemakers blasted a deadly reply. A man screamed and the sound choked off.

Reese raced the length of the burning house. Bullets fanned his cheek, tugged at his shirt. He heard angry shouts. His sixes slammed death toward the raiders and he began to have a faint hope that he might make his escape. The corner of the house was only a few feet away.

He had to veer toward the fence as licking flames shot out from the wall. He had a brief glimpse of a squat, swarthy-featured gunhawk who bore down on him. Reese's gun wrist twisted, his six lining down. At that instant something struck him on the head. The top of his skull seemed to fly off into a thousand pieces. Everything was instantly blotted out as though a dark lid had slammed down on the world. Steve Reese never knew when he hit the ground.

He lay sprawled there, close to the wall. The flames crackled in loud triumph and the wall seemed to sway outward and over the still figure.

Their job done, the raiders moved away from the fence. For a time the cowboys were held prisoners in the bunkhouse as the killers pumped a steady fire into the stout walls. Then, as suddenly as they had come, the raiders drew off with derisive yells.

One end of the ranchhouse caved in and sparks leaped triumphantly upward. One wall leaned further out over the still body of the CPA field chief.

CHAPTER VIII

Visitors

UNEASILY Steve Reese stirred and moaned. His head felt as if it had been split in two and breathing was difficult. Each gulp of air seemed to seer and burn his lungs.

He rolled over, his eyes flickered open, and he looked directly upward at what seemed to be a hanging wall of flame and charred timber. Slowly his stunned brain realized his danger. At any second that leaning wall would crash down and he would be buried beneath it!

He drew up his legs and tried to push himself up on his arms. They gave way and he dropped. The world seemed to spin around like a top but Reese grimly hung onto his senses. He came up on hands and knees again and painfully, slowly crawled away from the house. The wall swayed, checked, and burned more fiercely. Every muscle was strained as he dragged himself toward safety.

He heard a ripping sound behind him, then a rush of hot wind as the wall crashed outward. The ground jarred just behind him. Sparks and burning embers flew outward. A wave of heat swept over him.

Reese dropped low, holding his breath. He felt a burn on his back and crawled frantically on.

At last the heat lessened. Steve Reese expelled his breath with a gusty sigh, then one of the Running A waddies was running up to him. Hands slapped out smoldering spots on his clothing. Others dragged him further back toward the fence. There he lay quiet for a moment, eyes closed, breathing deeply, fighting against the nausea and pain. At last he sat up. Grim men stood nearby, watching the red-glowing heap that had once been the ranchhouse.

"The sneakin', killin' skunks!" a puncher growled in a low, intense voice. "I'd shore like to get every cussed one of 'em in my gun-sights."

"Aldag?" Steve Reese asked weakly.

A man turned instantly and bent down. "Take it easy, hombre," he said. "Yuh got a crease across the top of yore scalp. Blamed lucky yuh came to when yuh did. Yuh'd be roastin' out there."

"What about Aldag?" Reese insisted.

"Dead," the man said in a short, clipped tone. "It's so hot we can't even reach his body yet. Them skunks shot him down when he run out."

"Held us tight in the bunkhouse," another man said, and swore. "I didn't even get a glimpse of their faces. Wore neckerchiefs up over their noses."

Steve Reese recalled his glimpse of the swarthy killer who had charged down on him from the fence row, and he had recognized that man. The bushwhacker had been Nick Mosely, the man who was supposed to have left the Arrow B. Reese said nothing about that, however, but held his head in his hands until the last of the dizziness left him. His head still ached when he came to his feet and two of the Running A hands led him to the bunkhouse to patch up the scalp wound.

Riders came in from the Rafter M, with Ben Milburn and Dusty Trail at their head. Reese came out of the bunkhouse as a man threw a loop over Aldag's foot and dragged the body clear of the house. It was badly charred and Milburn hastily threw a blanket over the still form. He turned, his face tight.

"Who did it?" he demanded.

"No tellin'," one of Aldag's men said. "Raiders—but they was all masked."

Milburn's lips snarled back in anger over his teeth.

"I can shore do some guessin'. Who'd profit most if the Runnin' A is gone and Bob is dead?"

"Arrow B," came from a dozen throats like an animal's growl.

"The Barretts," Milburn said.

Steve Reese pushed to the center of the circle. As badly injured as he was he had his wits about him enough to realize that these men had to be checked if Quilado was not to break into open war right now. Milburn might be right, but Art Barrett and King Olin would welcome a fighting delegation of the small ranchers. That would give the Arrow B a legal excuse to smash its opposition, once and for all. Milburn and Wythe would probably be among the first to fall before Olin's gunslingers.

"You can't prove it was the Arrow B," Reese said.

Milburn swung on him.

"I got ideas enough to read the trail," he snapped.

The close packed cowboys growled approval.

"That's not proof," Reese said desperately. "If you attack the Arrow B, you lay yourself wide open to the law. You face jail or a hangnoose. I agree that the killers who did this job should be hung—but let the law do it."

"Scared?" someone asked.

Reese whirled on the man who spoke, and grabbed his shirt front.

"Not a bit, hombre. I'm trying to pound some sense into your thick skulls. Of course, all of us are mad clear through—and with good reason. But if you take the law in your own hands, you're no better than the snakes who killed Aldag."

DUSTY Trail shoved to Milburn's side. The pudgy man held out his arms for silence.

"I don't know this gent Reese here," he said, "except for hearin' his name called, and I ain't rightly a Quilado man. But this Reese shore speaks sense to me. I'd a heap rather wait to put a loop around a skunk than dance at the end of a rope myself."

Milburn hesitated, then shrugged.

"Mebbe yuh're right, Dusty. Leastways, we can call a meetin' and talk it over before we make a move. I reckon I lost my head complete for a while. Just where do you stand, Reese? Who are yuh, and what are yuh doin' here?"

"Aldag wrote to the CPA and I was sent to Quilado," Reese answered, displaying his badge. "Believe me, I'll do everything I can to bring Aldag's killers to justice."

Milburn looked at the CPA man's patched scalp, at the burnt holes in his shirt and trousers. He nodded gravely.

"I believe yuh will. They blamed near roasted yuh along with Bob, at that."

"I'm riding to the Arrow B," Reese said. "Give me a chance to work before you make any rash moves."

"It'll shore be hard to set tight after this," Milburn said slowly, "and I can't promise what the rest'll say—except for Dusty Trail, and yuh've already heard him speak his pieces. But I'll shore give all the boys yore argument, Reese."

"Thanks," Reese said. "Between you and Trail, here, I think you can prevent trouble."

The raiders had made no attempt to harm anything but the main ranchhouse. The bunkhouse was chewed up with slugs and the windows broken, but there had been no destruction of any other building. At daylight, some of the men tried to trail the killer band, but they soon returned. The raiders had split up about a mile away, scattering in various directions.

Later in the morning, Running A hands came in from the range reporting that, so far as they could tell, no beef had been run off. Bob Aldag's body was placed in a buckboard and driven to Quilado and the undertaker.

"Ray Lantry first," Ben Milburn said, looking after the wagon, "and then Bob Aldag. Wonder who'll be next?"

"None, if I can prevent it," Reese said.

He turned and got into his saddle. With a brief wave to Milburn and Dusty Trail he neck-reined his horse and started back toward the Arrow B.

When Reese rode into the Arrow B yard he realized instantly that few of the gunslammers were in sight. His jaw set and a muscle jumped in his lean cheek as he swung out of leather and walked to the bunkhouse. He opened the door and looked inside. Many of the bunks were filled with sleeping men. The man named Snake looked up from the table where he had a solitaire layout.

"Lose somethin', lawman?" he asked insolently.

"Not yet," Reese answered levelly. "The boys must have had a night of it."

"Heavy poker game," Snake answered surlily. "Didn't break up till daylight."

Reese's eyes again traveled around the bunks, hoping to find the mark of a wound on some of the sleepers. He saw none. Hank Ball came in the door and pulled up short when he saw Reese. The redhead showed only hostility.

"Gettin' so a man can't go nowheres but what there's a tin badge around," he complained.

"Did you play poker last night, too?" Reese asked levelly.

Hank's eyelid dropped swiftly and Snake missed the wink.

"Shore," Hank said. "The boys figgered I was too new a hand to be playin' anything else. They opened a pot for me."

Reese said nothing more, but turned on his heel and walked out of the bunkhouse. Hank had told him, in a veiled manner, that he had not been allowed to take part in the Arrow B's activities, and had confirmed the field chief's suspicions. The gunhawks had been out most of the night, and Reese knew that Nick Mosely had been with them. But there still remained the hard problem of proof.

He crossed the yard, entered the house, and walked down the hall to the office, where Art and Tom Barrett sat close-huddled over the desk. The brothers looked up as Steve Reese came in, and Tom's eyes widened in surprise.

"What happened to yuh?" he demanded.

"A little trouble," Reese said dryly. He jerked his thumb toward the bunkhouse. "Were your boys out riding last night?"

A brief, swift glance passed between the brothers. Tom shook his head. Reese's hard scrutiny switched to Art. The man flushed, but met the direct, challenging look.

"They wasn't out," he said steadily.

"Bob Aldag's spread was raided last night," Steve Reese said slowly. "Raiders set fire to the house and waited to blast Aldag and me down as we ran out. Bob was killed. I got creased. I escaped with only a few burns and a scalp wound, but that was only luck."

TOM'S hand gripped the desk edge and he looked slightly sick. Once again that glance passed between the two brothers. Art hastily came to his feet and his face showed concern.

"That's bad! Yuh shore yuh're all right?"

"I'm all right. But Bob Aldag is dead. And the small ranchers have an idea who was behind the raid."

Tom Barrett gulped, and his voice sounded weak despite the bluster he tried to assume. "They think we did it?"

"Yes," Reese answered as he nodded grimly. Art Barrett laughed, but the sound was without mirth.

"Plumb ridiculous," he said. "Why, every Arrow B man will swear he was right here on the spread last night—all night. They can't pin a thing like that on us without proof."

"No," Reese conceded. He leaned over the desk. "There's no proof—now. But there might be. I intend to see that the skunk who led the raiders and the snake who ordered the job done get hangnooses around their necks."

"Step sort of careful," Art suggested with concern. "Yuh can't tell what might happen if yuh go around lookin' for trouble."

Steve Reese smiled crookedly.

"Thanks for your worry, Barrett. The killers won't gain a thing by getting me. The CPA will back me to the limit, and so will the law. If I'm killed, another will take my place and the manhunt will go on. No, killing me won't help the killers escape. It'll just put the hemp around their necks that much tighter."

Involuntarily, Tom's fingers strayed up to his throat and his black eyes looked frightened. He jerked his hand away when he caught the CPA man's searching look and smiled weakly.

"Yuh're right, Reese," he said hastily. "I reckon there'll always be another lawman on the trail. There won't be any escape."

Art moved to Reese's side.

"Yuh'd better get some rest, Reese," he said, the concern still in his voice. "Yuh've had a bad time, hombre. I'll ride to Quilado and offer the Arrow B's help to the sheriff."

"Now that's right thoughtful," Reese said as he turned to the door, "but take my advice. You, Tom, and every other man on the Arrow B payroll stay off the roads. Right or wrong, your neighbors hate you with a killing hatred. Keep that in mind."

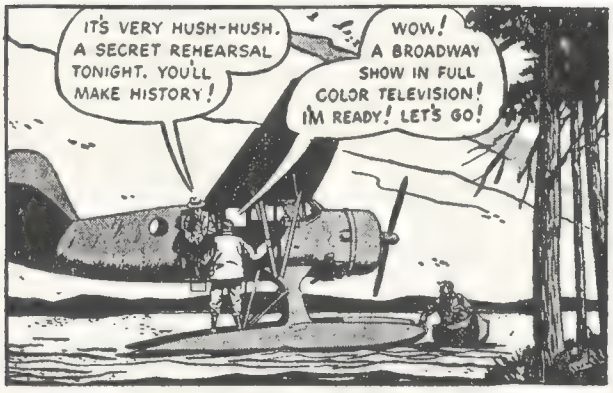
He turned without further word and strode down the hall to his room. As he undressed and sank gratefully down on the bed he had no doubt but that the Barretts were in serious conference at the moment, but there was nothing he could do about it. That worried him less than what the small ranchers might be planning. Some of them would be for violent action, and Reese fervently hoped that the cooler heads would be able to control the rest.

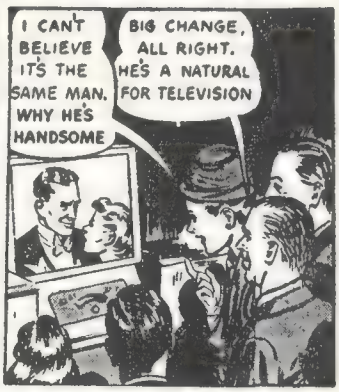
He dropped off to sleep, bone-weary and exhausted, still worrying about what the results of the raid would be. He felt sure that

[Turn to Page 40]

Bob Got Out Of The Woods In A Hurry When...

IF THAT BLASTED PLANE HADN'T SCARED HIM, I'D HAVE SHOT THAT MOOSE
LOOK... HE'S LANDING ON OUR LAKE. LET'S SEE WHAT'S COOKING!
BOB ALLEN, YOUNG ACTOR, RESTS FROM A LONG RUN ON BROADWAY BY HUNTING UP NORTH


IT'S VERY HUSH-HUSH. A SECRET REHEARSAL TONIGHT. YOU'LL MAKE HISTORY!
WOW! A BROADWAY SHOW IN FULL COLOR TELEVISION! I'M READY! LET'S GO!



I THINK YOU WERE MARVELOUS
JOIN US FOR A LATE SNACK, ALLEN. I'VE GOT GREAT PLANS FOR THIS SHOW... AND YOU'RE IN THEM
SEE WHAT A THIN GILLETTE SHAVE DOES FOR A MAN!

YOU ALWAYS GET REFRESHING, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES WITH THIN GILLETTE BLADES, FOR THESE ARE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING, LOW-PRICED BLADES YOU EVER USED. AND BECAUSE THEY FIT YOUR RAZOR PRECISELY, THEY PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM THE SMART AND IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
4 for 10¢

he could depend on Dusty Trail to work to check the hotheads. Milburn might help, but Reese had an idea that Milburn blew hot and cold, depending upon who had last talked to him. At last Steve Reese's eyes closed and all worry ceased.

It was early evening before he awoke. Supper was already over, but the smiling Chinese cook prepared a tasty tray for the CPA man. Art and Tom were closeted in their office and the idle gunslammers again were loafing in the yard.

After Reese had eaten, he left the house, apparently wandering aimlessly along the yard fence. Twilight faded fast into night and a lamp gleamed from the bunkhouse window. Reaching the gate, he leaned against a post as if idly contemplating the night range.

A shadow moved nearby and a familiar voice called Steve Reese's name. He stiffened, then relaxed, but kept his eyes on the bunkhouse and the yard. No one was near.

"Good work, Hank," he said, low. "Learn anything?"

"Not much, Doc." The voice that answered came from a shadowy clump of bushes. "King Olin likes the looks of my guns but he ain't showin' any cards till he's shore of me. Like last night."

"What happened?"

"Shucks, I don't know. The whole deal was pulled mighty slick to keep me hobbled right here. There was a poker game and King made certin I got in it. Then, first thing I knew, most of them gunslammers had slipped out and was plumb gone. Most of 'em came back a little after midnight but some ain't back yet."

"Probably wounded," Steve said. "I winged one that I'm sure of. I heard him yelp. Keep at the job, Hank. I'm more certain than ever that the Arrow B is behind Aldag's death—and Lantry's."

"Doc, don't it beat all how we pick the killer outfits? Yuh know, someday I'm going to setle down right peaceful."

"Not you, Hank." Reese chuckled softly. "You'll be asking St. Peter if there's trouble beyond the Pearly Gates."

Reese moved off and back to the house. Tom and Art were still in their office, obviously avoiding him, so he went to his room. Not long after, he was asleep again.

Just at breakfast the next morning, a shout from the yard brought Reese twisting around toward the dining room window. Art Barrett spoke in a startled tone, but there was a note of triumph in his voice.

"Visitors! The squatters!"

Steve Reese's jaw set grimly and he pushed back from the table. A considerable band of men had come to the yard gate and had halted there. Reese saw Milburn and Dusty Trail at their head.

Arrow B gunhands formed a silent, waiting line between the visitors and the ranchhouse. King Olin came hurrying out of his shack, buckling on his gun-belt. Art and Tom Barrett hastily left the room and Reese whirled and raced down the hall to the outer door.

CHAPTER IX

Ultimatum

WHAT Reese had feared had come about. Dusty Trail had not been able to check this visit to the Arrow B. Ben Milburn must have thrown in with the hotheads.

As Reese ran toward the gate he heard King Olin's harsh voice.

"Lookin' for trouble, gents?" he demanded arrogantly.

The gunslammers slowly fanned out to form a half circle around the group bunched at the gate. Ben Milburn shook his head.

"Not right away, Olin. Leastways, we hope not. We'd like a palaver with Art and Tom."

The brothers came out of the house. Art's thin lips were quirked in a crooked grin, but Tom's face was sober. They came slowly toward the group. Reese, now close to King Olin, caught Dusty's troubled look. Just behind Dusty was a lean man with the glittering eyes of a fanatic. If trouble did break out, Reese thought grimly, that man would start it—unless the Barretts beat him to it.

Art and Tom were halted just beyond the line of their gun guards.

"What's in yore craw, Milburn?" Art demanded.

"A palaver, Barrett."

"Spit it out then," Art snapped.

Milburn flushed but held his temper.

"The Runnin' A was burned plumb to the ground the other night and Bob Aldag was killed," he said. "We're askin' for the gents that did the job."

"Why should yuh come to the Arrow B?" Art demanded.

The man behind Milburn pushed forward, his lips peeled back from his teeth. He shook

his fist at Barrett, though Milburn tried to check the fellow.

"Keep yore temper, Walt," Milburn said to him worriedly. "We don't want trouble."

"Trouble!" Walt Wythe fairly screeched. "Who but them two buzzards there brought trouble to Quilado? Yuh face a showdown, Arrow B!"

Art's sharp glance strayed to King Olin. The segundo's harsh lips spread in a wide grin and Reese's hands dropped close to his Peacemakers. Before Art could reply, Ben Milburn pushed forward.

"We ain't wantin' trouble, Barrett, unless it's forced on us," he said. "But we know blamed well that you was behind the Runnin' A raid. Them snakes was worse'n Injuns in the old days, burnin' and killin'. We want the gents that did it."

"Yuh've come to the wrong place," Art said coldly. "Look somewheres else."

"You're the only one that gained from Bob's killin'," Milburn said stubbornly.

"I say we had nothin' to do with it!" Art snapped.

"Yuh're a blasted liar!" Walt Wythe broke out.

Art's face went pale. King Olin swore under his breath and took a half step forward, his hand slashing down to his gun. Wythe had faded back to the crowd, but Steve Reese recognized the signs. In a split second there would be mass murder, for Arrow B gunhawks outnumbered the squatters.

King's six had almost cleared leather and his mouth opened to bellow fighting orders to his killers who fairly ached to begin the slaughter. It showed in every glittering eye in the tremble of hands, clawed above gun butts. Reese's own Peacemakers jumped from their holsters and he rammed the barrel of one in the middle of King's back.

"Freeze!" he snapped. His other six swept in a menacing arc from gunhawk to squatter. "The first man that pulls a six gets a slug!"

Silence fell on the whole group, a silence in which tension piled on tension until the very air seemed electrical. Reese caught a slight move among the gunhawks and his six instantly swiveled and lined on a pinch-eyed man.

"You'll be the first in Boot Hill!" he warned.

The man's fingers jerked away from his gun butt.

"There's just one of him!" Walt Wythe yelled, and instantly Reese's six flicked up and Walt stared down into the black barrel.

Reese felt King Olin's tremor along the barrel of the other gun. The field chief held the men for the moment, but it was only by the thin thread of stubborn courage and daring bluff, and he knew it. Of course he also could depend on Dusty and Hank, but that would expose their hands before he was ready.

"Just one of me," Reese acknowledged coldly. "But you'll get my slug first if anything starts. Art, I'll blow King's spine through his belt buckle if Arrow B starts trouble."

The Barrett brothers remained frozen, their fingers already locked around their gun butts. Hank Ball stood close to them. Dusty Trail was narrowly watching the cowboys from the small spreads.

THREE against the mob, Steve Reese thought—just three.

Once more a tense silence settled on the group. It couldn't last long, Reese knew. In a matter of seconds he would bluff through—or six-guns would thunder He would be the logical first target for either side, since he alone had checked both Arrow B and squatters.

Instinctively he braced muscles and nerves for the shock of tearing lead.

Then King Olin's nerve broke. The small round pressure of the six at his backbone spelled death for him. He knew it. His voice rose, holding a trace of panic.

"Don't start nothin', Art. Yuh'll have me killed if yuh do!"

Art Barrett glanced uncertainly from Reese to the ranchers, then to King's drawn face. Tom Barrett's hand dropped away from his gun.

"We're peaceful, Reese," Tom said. "Back to the bunkhouse, men. Stay there. Yuh can let King go, Reese."

"Not for a while," Reese said grimly. "I want to make sure there's no powder burned."

The gunhawks stirred, and reluctantly moved back toward the bunkhouse. Now and then they cast disappointed glances over their shoulders, but at last they disappeared. Reese kept his gun in the small of King's back and the other lined on Walt Wythe.

"Lift your six out slow, King, and drop it," Reese ordered. "No harm meant, but I want to make sure of my own skin."

The segundo gingerly lifted his Colt out with thumb and two fingers. When it cleared leather, he dropped the weapon as though it had been hot. Instantly Reese's six was removed from his back. King moved to Art Barrett's side, face still pale, sweat standing out on his forehead.

Steve Reese's glance locked with that of Walt Wythe.

"I'm here to see justice is done on both sides," he said. "I don't intend to stop your parley, but I won't stand gunplay. Savvy?"

"Just what's yore brand?" Walt demanded.

"He's a CPA man," Art spoke up before Reese could answer. "Tom sent for him."

Art Barrett told the truth, but in such a way that it seemed the CPA was standing behind the Arrow B. Reese flushed but again before he could speak someone else cut in, this time Walt Wythe.

"Paid lawman!" Wythe sneered. "I reckon I can read yore kind of justice. It'll be all for the Barretts and nothin' for us. We want Aldag's killers and we aim to get 'em."

"They want trouble, Reese," Art said. "Let 'em have it. Now yuh see what the Arrow B has to face."

"Shut yore fool mouth, Walt," Milburn said angrily. He turned to Art Barrett. "Mebbe we'd better ask some questions. Was yore crew away from the Arrow B night before last?"

"None of 'em," Art said flatly. "I told Reese as much."

"How about it Reese?" Milburn asked.

Reese knew that Art Barrett lied, but he dared not tell Milburn and his friends as much. They would instantly start the range war that the CPA man was striving to avoid. He faced Milburn unflinchingly.

"Art told me the Arrow B hands were right here. I haven't made any move against the Barretts because of what happened at the Running A. Is that enough?"

"Not by a blamed sight!" Wythe shouted. He faced Art and Tom, green eyes blazing. "Yuh figger yuh got away with that burnin'! You figger yore hired lawman here can protect yuh! Right now, yuh hold the blue chips, but yuh shore will pay."

"Is that a threat?" Art demanded.

"Shore it is. If the Running A was burnt, the Arrow B can go up in smoke too! If Ray Lantry and Bob Aldag was shot down, I reckon some Barrett blood can flow."

"That's enough, Wythe!" Steve Reese snapped.

Art made a slight negative gesture with his hand.

"Yuh're speakin' for yoreself?" he asked Walt Wythe.

"Blast yuh, no! I'm talkin' for every rancher in Quilado that yuh've tried to run off —Milburn and the rest of 'em. I'm talkin' for pore Karen Lantry, whose pa yuh had shot down."

"You've said enough, Wythe," Reese said coldly, and his eyes cut along the group. "Head for your homes and stay there, men. If you want law and justice, there's a sheriff and judge in Quilado. Work through them or don't work at all."

"I'm goin'," Walt Wythe said, a rasp in his voice. He shook his fist at the Barretts and snarled at Reese. "But I ain't goin' for my rights to a crooked judge or to a hired lawman like you! We'll be back, Barretts, and yuh'll wish yuh'd never come to Quilado!"

HE NECK-REINED his horse and rode off, thin shoulders set in a stubborn, fighting line. Milburn flushed, started to say something, but sighed instead. He followed Wythe and the rest of the men, a round dozen of them, fell in line behind Milburn. Reese watched them go, guns still in his hands.

At last he holstered the weapons and breathed a deep sigh of relief. He turned to Art.

"That was close, Barrett. You see what you're fighting."

Art smiled, and then laughed. "Scarecrows, that's all. King, get one of yore men ready to ride to the sheriff. That redhead we just hired will do."

"What's on your mind?" Reese demanded.

Art's brows rose.

"I'm just takin' steps—legal, Reese—to protect my property. Yuh can't object to that."

Reese shook his head but his dark eyes were filled with suspicion. Art Barrett could be depended on to pull some trick out of the hat, though the CPA man couldn't see it at the moment. He turned and walked back to the house. A few minutes later, he saw Hank Ball streak out of the gate and head for distant Quilado.

"Now what move is Art making next?" Steve asked himself.

The answer, he decided, would have to wait on developments.

Late in the afternoon, Hank Ball returned, with Tex Gage riding beside him. The young sheriff came directly to the house while Hank led the horses to the corral. Steve Reese stepped out into the corridor and Art hailed him from the office door.

"Better come in, Reese. I want yuh to hear this."

Reese walked into the office. Tex Gage, sitting in a chair by the desk, nodded briefly. King Olin and Tom Barrett stood by the window. Art sat down in the desk chair, grinned crookedly at Reese and then faced the lawman.

"We had a little trouble out here this mornin', Gage. Some of our neighbors decided that we'd burned the Runnin' A and killed Bob Aldag. They came out for vengeance. Reese stopped 'em."

"The boys are mighty proddy over that killin', Barrett," Gage said soberly. "They say the signs point to the Arrow B."

"They'll always say that." Art made a gesture of dismissal. "And there's no proof at all against us. Now, as citizens, entitled to the protection of the law, we're askin' you to make some arrests, sheriff."

"Who?" Tex blurted, surprised.

"Walt Wythe claimed that he spoke for the whole group and no one denied it. King, Tom and Reese here are witnesses. Walt threatened the Arrow B with destruction and threatened to kill Tom and me. Ain't that right, Reese?"

Now the CPA field chief understood Art's maneuver in calling the sheriff, but he had to admit the truth. He nodded, warily. Art's smile grew broader.

"I demand the arrest of Ben Milburn, Walt Wythe and Karen Lantry. Our lives and our property are threatened at their hands and we won't be safe till they're in jail. Tom and I will appear in court to support the charges."

Tex Gage gripped the arms of his chair, his eyes almost bugging from his head. Tom Barrett had jerked around when his brother mentioned Karen, and even King Olin seemed startled. Reese had only a fleeting impression of their faces, then Tex was on his feet.

"Karen Lantry! Are yuh completely loco!"

"Not a bit, Gage. She's part of the group that's fightin' us. She's made one threat direct and now a second through Walt Wythe. The girl must be in jail with the rest of 'em."

"Blamed if I'll do it!" Tex swore.

Art came to his feet.

"Blamed if yuh don't. Yuh either make them arrests or I'll see that yuh lose yore badge."

Tex and Art glared at one another. Tom cleared his throat and spoke accusingly.

"Yuh didn't include Karen, Art, when we talked this over."

"She's as guilty as the rest," Art snapped. "Just because yuh're losin' yore head about her—"

"That's enough, Art!" Tom said sharply.

Tex swung away, his glance locking with Tom's. The sheriff's face paled and his fists clenched.

"Yuh're tryin' to get Karen!" he exclaimed. He laughed. "Yuh haven't a chance. Not a chance."

"Why not?" Tom demanded.

"She hates you Barretts." Tex took a deep breath. "Besides I intend to marry her if she'll have me."

TOM said nothing, but his eyes narrowed. Suddenly his fist lashed out and he caught Tex a glancing blow along the side of the cheek. Instantly Reese stepped in, checking Gage's angry rush. Art swung around on Tom, face blazing.

"Yuh've done enough damage. Let me handle this and keep yore hands to yoreself." Art turned back to Tex, his voice filled with regret. "I'm sorry this happened, Gage, and I apologize for my brother. I reckon we've all got a burr under our saddles right now."

"I won't arrest Karen," Tex said shortly.

Reese stepped back, but watched him narrowly. Tom stood by the window, his face dark and scowling.

"All right," Art sighed. "We'll draw the line there. But I want Ben Milburn and Walt Wythe in jail—for my protection and their own good."

Tex looked helplessly at Steve Reese who understood that Art's demand placed the sheriff in a bad position. As lawman, he had to take action on the charges Art had made, but once he made the arrests, he faced definite trouble from Karen Lantry.

Reese looked significantly at Gage's badge and the young man flushed. His chin set stubbornly.

"I'll think it over," he said.

Art's fist doubled and his lips pressed in a straight line. Then he gained control of himself and nodded.

"Think it over, Gage," he agreed, "but not too long. If Milburn and Wythe ain't in jail by tomorrer night, I'm goin' to Judge Colmar. If I do, I won't be so easy on the Lantry gal."

Tex turned sharply on his heel and walked out of the office with long, angry strides. Art laughed and his eyes blazed triumphantly.

"I told yuh, Reese, we Barretts could handle anything. Now we'll either get action in our favor, or a new sheriff more to our liking."

"My warning still goes," Steve Reese said soberly. "You'll trip up some day, Art—and bad."

"Is that a threat?" Tom demanded in an ugly tone.

Steve Reese turned on the man.

"You seem to go around looking for trouble." Steve said. "It might come to you some time."

CHAPTER X

Murder

DASHING out after Tex Gage, Reese caught the young officer just as he swung into saddle. Tex glared down at him, and then a ghost of a smile touched his lips. He glanced up toward the ranchhouse.

"They got me in a tight, Reese. "I'm ready to turn in my badge."

"Not yet, Tex," Reese said. He looked around. No one was near. "Make those arrests if you have to, but find Nick Mosely. I've told no one yet, but I know he was one of the Running A raiders. I saw him myself. I don't know who the rest were, but I do know Art's lying when he said the Arrow B men all were right here all that night. Find Nick Mosely and work the truth out of him. Do it quick!"

Tex jerked back, startled, and then a flood of relief swept over his face.

"Yuh mean it, Reese?"

"Certainly. I'm holding my knowledge of Mosely as an ace in the hole. I can't prove that Art was lying but Nick will know, if you can force the truth out of him."

Tex grinned and nodded, then his face tightened.

"I'll get Nick," he said flatly.

He touched spurs and rode out of the yard, heading back toward town. Reese watched him go, then turned thoughtfully back to the house.

He sensed the mounting tension between Tom and Art, and he shrewdly guessed that Karen Lantry was the reason for it. Art had steadily tricked his brother, but he had carried the game too far. Tom was now ready to kick over the traces and Reese hoped it would come before long. If the Barretts started fighting among themselves, then the truth might come out.

When Steve entered the house, he saw that the thick office door was tightly closed. But he heard the steady drone of an angry voice. He couldn't make out the words but it was Tom who spoke. Reese smiled thinly and turned to his own room.

Tom did not appear at the supper table and Art plainly showed that he was angry. He paid strict attention to his plate. After he had finished, he grunted something to Steve Reese and left. The CPA field chief returned to his room, but didn't light the lamp. He sat by the grilled window, looking out on the darkened patio, his brain working on the various angles of the Quilado problem.

Colonel Beauvine had been right when he had said the case would be a hard one. For there were factions within factions. Tom and Art Barrett fought one another. Walt Wythe and Ben Milburn headed two separate factions of the small ranchers whom the Arrow B threatened with extinction. Treachery and death could strike without warning.

Suddenly Reese saw a shadow flit across the patio and all his attention focused on it instantly. He saw a man crouching in the shadow of a bush on the far side of the patio. Reese slowly stood up. The heavy iron grille work prevented him from entering the patio directly and besides his gun-belt hung on the foot of the bed several feet away.

He moved noiselessly from the window to the bed, and silently returned to the window, gun in his hand. But the man in the shadows was gone. He waited to make sure that the prowler was not lurking anywhere, but there was no sign of him.

Reese groped his way across the room to the door, opened it. The hall was dark and the house silent. Moving quietly the field chief edged down the hall to the turn that would take him to the far wing. Tom and Art slept over there. He rounded the turn and cat-footed down the hall, but stopped abruptly when he reached the door that led to the patio. It was open, and that meant the prowler had come this way. Steve gripped his six-gun more firmly and edged on.

Reaching the next turn, he flattened himself against the wall and peered around the corner. The hall was a corridor of blackness and he could see nothing. He slipped around the turn and felt his way forward. His fingers touched a closed door in the wall and he edged beyond it. He thought he heard a slight, muffled sound in the darkness and stopped short. His thumb dogged back the hammer of the Colt.

He heard a sudden cry, muffled by the thick wall, and the next instant a shot crashed. Reese whirled and threw his shoulder against the door he had just passed. It crashed open and back against the wall and he plunged into the room. He caught a glimpse of a fleeting shadow as it whisked between himself and the grilled window.

He threw up his six, but the danger was from a slightly different direction. A hurtling, dark figure struck him, driving him back against the wall, forcing the breath

King glared at Reese.

"We'd've had that jasper dead to rights by now if you hadn't talked us out of it. Blast yuh! Yuh're sidin' that killin' son just like I said! Mebbe yuh let him get away at the Arrow B!"

"You're a liar, King," Reese answered steadily.

King swore and jumped to his feet. His six jumped from leather and lined on the CPA man's chest, his face working angrily.

"I'll blast yuh down right here, tin badge!"

"Put that Colt up, Olin," Colmar snapped from the bench.

King didn't seem to hear him and Art stepped in.

"Put it up, King. I reckon Reese did what he thought was right." He swung back to Colmar. "Judge, Tex can't go far. He'll hide right here in Quilado County and I know the skunks who'll protect him. Ben Milburn or that girl, Karen Lantry, will hide him and I want their spreads searched from one end to the other."

"Still trying to start a range war, Barrett?" Steve Reese asked quietly. He, too, faced Colmar. "Judge, you know the temper of the little ranchers against the Arrow B. Right or wrong, they still hate the Barretts. A move like this will cause serious trouble—maybe more than the law can handle before there's bloodshed."

Colmar stroked his long jaw and passed his hand wearily over his wrinkled face.

"You're right, Reese. Art, it's the duty of a citizen to turn a fugitive over to the law. We can take no further steps unless we have definite proof that an outlaw is being aided. I can't order a search of those properties."

Art drew himself up.

"Then yuh won't help find a renegade and killer?"

"That's the wrong attitude, Barrett. I won't give an order that denies a man his right to privacy. There's no use arguing the point any further."

"All right," Art said softly, and his eyes narrowed. "Come on, King, I reckon we've got work to do. Ridin' back, Reese?"

"Not for a while. I think I'll check a few things on Tex Gage."

"If the judge will let you," Art said with a sneer.

He glared at Judge Colmar and turned sharply toward the door. He strode out, spurs jingling angrily. King Olin smiled slowly at Reese and there was a spark of triumph in his eyes. He moved after Art, more leisurely. In a short time only the judge, Deputy Keever and Reese were in the room.

"It's a bad business," Colmar sighed. "I've been holding my breath for fear Quilado will break out in a war that'll beat the one in Lincoln County."

"It'll come any day, Judge," Reese said.

He walked to the door and made sure all of the Arrow B hands were gone. Then he returned to the bench.

"I want a warrant for the arrest of Nick Mosely, Judge," he said. "He murdered Ray Lantry and Bob Aldag. He led the raiders who set fire to the Running A, and he tried to get me."

Colmar stared at Reese in amazement.

"Why in thunderation haven't you made these charges before?" he demanded.

"To keep war from Quilado, Judge. If Wythe and his bunch knew of this, the Arrow B would be attacked. Either Art Barrett or someone at the Arrow B is behind Mosely. If they know of this warrant, they'll get Nick out of the country and cover their trail, or they'll bring things to a head in murder and gunfire before the law can move."

"Give me the evidence for your charge against Mosely," Colmar said gravely.

Reese told the whole story and Judge Colmar's face became black with fury. Without a word he filled out another warrant and extended it to Keever.

"Looks like you'll be busy hunting killers," he said to the deputy.

"One other thing," Reese said. "I honestly believe that Art Barrett will try to do his own searching for Tex Gage. I don't think the man will do anything to endanger himself directly in the courts. Issue a restraining warrant against Barrett and all the Arrow B hands. Keep them on the spread."

"Art Barrett will hit the sky," Colmar said, "but it's about time he learned that his power has limits. Can you serve it, Keever?"

"Deputize me, Judge," Reese said swiftly. "I already carry a CPA badge. I'll serve the order."

COLMAR looked relieved and in another minute Reese was a deputy sheriff of Quilado County. He had the restraining order and injunction in his pocket. When he walked out of the courthouse and swung into saddle, he felt much better able to cope with the trouble in Quilado. Now he had full and direct authority to make arrests.

He rode back to the Arrow B at an easy lope. The Arrow B would be hobbled for a time and Reese would have a better chance to get to the bottom of Tom Barrett's murder, and find out who was backing Nick

In less than half an hour a grim procession rode out of the Arrow B yard and headed for Quilado. Tom's body, wrapped in blankets, lay in the back of the buckboard. The gunslamming killers of the Arrow B rode grouped around the wagon, with Art Barrett, King Olin and Steve Reese heading them.

NONE of the men spoke and Reese was glad of the chance to do some thinking about the handkerchief. He knew the bullet had been fired through it, and that Tom had died. But why had the killer used the handkerchief? It wouldn't muffle the sound of the shot as a pillow would have.

And why had the handkerchief been dropped under the bed?

The killer had moved fast and Reese gave him full credit for thinking with lightning speed on his feet. Reese still believed that the killer was no outsider and he didn't rule out the probability of Nick Mosely being the murderer. And there was no motive for the killing either, unless some small rancher had struck back at the Barretts. But Reese did not believe that. Such a line of reasoning just wouldn't hold water.

Most of Quilado was in bed when the Arrow B rode into town. Art did not head for the sheriff's office but rounded the corner of a side street. He pulled up before a small store building, completely dark.

"Rouse the Chinese," he ordered King.

The segundo dismounted and pounded on the door. Reese quietly checked the silent crew and found all of them present. No man had slipped away during the ride to Quilado.

The door opened a crack and an old Chinese looked out. King grabbed him and yanked him to Art's side. Barrett leaped down, extending the handkerchief while another man struck a match.

"Whose is that?" Art demanded. "That's yore mark."

Ah Sin looked at the mark and his almond eyes gleamed. He bobbed his head in eagerness.

"Ah Sin know. Them Tex Gage. Ah Sin do allee washee Tex Gage."

A sigh went along the line of waiting men like a breath of vengeance. Art's hand tightened on the handkerchief until it was wadded in a firm knot in his fist. His jaw stuck out.

"Tex Gage!" he spat out venomously. "Curse his killin' hide! He's in love with Karen Lantry and he knew Tom was. He knew he'd have no chance against what Tom could offer. And Tex and Tom had quarreled!"

"What do you intend to do, Barrett?" Reese asked.

"Do?" Barrett twisted around to face the CPA man. "My boys will get Tex Gage if they have to tear the jail down brick by brick! There's plenty of places to hang him right along the street here!"

"That's a one-way ticket to a hangnoose yourself," Reese said quietly. "Maybe you've got enough proof against Tex, maybe not. But you'd better present it legally."

"Yuh're sidin' that badge-toting killer!" King exclaimed and ugly sounds of approval came from the men.

Reese's jaw set as he faced Art Barrett.

"Tex Gage is innocent until proven guilty," he said sternly. "No lynch mob can do that, no matter how sure its members feel about the evidence. I'd say it was mighty flimsy. So will all of Quilado if you take the law in your own hands."

"Curse it, Reese, what do yuh expect me to do!" Art yelled, and swore lividly.

"If you hang Tex Gage, Art," Reese said steadily, "or make any move against him, every man in New Mexico will be against you. Every court and lawman will condemn you and be after your scalp. Take that evidence to the local judge and tell your story. If he sees fit, then he can issue a warrant to arrest Tex and hold him for trial. Arrow B will be clear all the way through."

Art Barrett sat silent and his men seemed to hang on his decision. But many a hand rested against the smooth wood of a gun butt. King Olin stood looking up at Art. Ah Sin, forgotten, quietly slipped inside his shop and the bolt snicked home. He wanted nothing at all to do with such troubles.

Steve Reese waited, tense. He noticed that Hank Ball sat his horse close, keeping a close watch on every move made. The field chief made a brief gesture, so quick that no one except Hank caught it. Reese's finger pointed toward the distant jail, then made a slight sweeping motion toward the wide range beyond the town. Hank's lips spread in a slight grin.

"Mebbe yuh're right, Reese," Art Barrett said slowly, at last.

"Don't listen to him, Art!" King Olin burst out. "Yore own brother was killed. I'm for stringin' up the killer!"

"Does the segundo rule the Arrow B?" Reese asked swiftly, and Art's head jerked up. Reese had touched his pride. His lips set in determination and he stuffed the powder-burnt handkerchief in his pocket.

"Yuh're right, Reese," he said. "No use

gettin' ourselves tangled with the law. The judge is close and we'll get the thing done right now. Tex Gage is goin' to face trial for murder—and I'm goin' to see that he hangs!"

The band of horsemen turned and rode away from Ah Sin's little shop. One of them remained in the shadows, a red-headed waddy with a reckless grin on his wide lips. As soon as the last of the gunslammers had turned the corner, he headed in a fast gallop for the jail.

SEVERAL blocks away, the Arrow B drew up before a dark house set back under shady trees. Art, King and Reese dismounted and strode up the walk. Art's loud knocking at last brought response and the door opened. A grumpy, sleepy-eyed man in a long nightshirt glared out at them. Then his jaw dropped in surprise.

"Art Barrett!" he exclaimed. "What brings you out at this hour!"

"Murder, Judge. My brother Tom has been killed and I want a warrant for the man that did the job."

Judge Colmar led them inside and excused himself while he dressed. Within a few minutes he was listening as Art told the story and produced the handkerchief. Reese narrowly watched the judge and decided that he had done the man a wrong. Colmar probably administered the law as he saw it. He was honest and fair, allowing no man's friendship or personality to influence his decisions.

"And Ah Sin identified this handkerchief?" he asked when Art had finished. Barrett nodded and the judge looked troubled. "It's not much, but still it points toward Tex. I can't believe the boy would do a sneaking thing like that though."

"I don't care what yuh believe!" Art said stubbornly. "I want him arrested."

Colmar sighed.

"I reckon there's nothing else I can do. A deputy will have to do the job. Let's get down to the courthouse so I can fill out a warrant."

CHAPTER XI

Uneasy Peace

IT TOOK some time before the form had been filled out and a deputy named Keever aroused from sleep and brought down to the court. He accepted the paper reluctantly as though it were poisoned and looked appealingly at the judge.

"I know what you're thinking, Keever," Judge Colmar sighed. "But it's not our job to think right now. Arrest Tex, lock him up, and take charge of the jail. We'll have a preliminary hearing in the morning. The coroner had best look at Tom."

Art Barrett agreed and ordered the buckboard to the local undertaker's.

All of them waited in the dimly lit courtroom for Deputy Keever to report back. Art Barrett paced up and down before the judge's bench, while King Olin sat at one of the tables, nervously cracking his knuckles. They heard a door slam downstairs and running boots race down the hall. Keever plunged into the room, eyes large.

"Tex is gone! He ain't at the jail—or his home!"

"He saw us ride in!" Art declared and swore. "He's run off!"

[*Turn page*]

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*The Famous Finger Nail Test
1 "It's F-N, the test for men!" Scratch your head—if you find dryness or loose dandruff you need Wildroot Cream-Oil. Buy the large economy size.
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WILDROOT CREAM-OIL
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CREAM-OIL CHARLIE SAYS: "IT CONTAINS LANOLIN!"
3 Get Wildroot Cream-Oil from your barber or drug counter and...Tune in the Woody Herman Show Saturdays 8 P. M. (EST) A B C (Blue) Network, 183 stations.
WILDROOT CREAM-OIL
contains LANOLIN

King glared at Reese.

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"Then yuh won't help find a renegade and killer?"

"That's the wrong attitude, Barrett. I won't give an order that denies a man his right to privacy. There's no use arguing the point any further."

"All right," Art said softly, and his eyes narrowed. "Come on, King, I reckon we've got work to do. Ridin' back, Reese?"

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Mosely. There might be a little trouble when Reese presented the court order, but he felt capable of handling it. The ranch looked peaceful. Stock was scattered about and two pack horses were drinking at a stream.

He came into the Arrow B yard as another rider rounded the corral and headed for the gate. Neither man had time to avoid the other and Reese stared into the swarthy face of Nick Mosely. The gunhawk recognized Reese at the same instant.

Viciously he pulled his horse to one side and his hand slashed down to his gun. Reese spurred his mount and the animal lunged forward. The impact sent Mosely's horse back on its haunches.

Reese's guns jumped from their holsters. Nick's strained face loomed close and the man's six blasted. The CPA man felt the sting of powder and the whistling cut of the slug as it fanned by his face. Then his own guns bucked back in his hands, spitting flame and smoke.

Mosely jerked erect in the stirrups, his thick lips pulled back from his teeth, unutterable surprise showing in his face. He catapulted back over the cantle and hit the ground, a limp, lifeless bundle. Steve Reese vaulted out of leather and ran to the sprawled figure. As he turned Nick over on his back, men erupted from the bunkhouse and King Olin shouted from the ranchhouse.

They came streaming toward Reese who arose, sixes still in his hands. Art and King came to a plunging halt as Reese's guns covered them.

"What in seven devils busted loose out here?" King demanded, and then he saw Nick's swarthy face. His shoulders jerked and he shot a quick look at Art Barrett.

"Barrett," Reese said, "you told me that Nick Mosely wasn't around the spread any more. He resisted arrest just now on a charge of double murder, and wrote his own death warrant."

Art stared wildly then gained his tongue. His head lifted arrogantly.

"Resisted arrest! You have no authority to make arrests!" Reese's quiet smile checked him and he caught the glint of lamplight from the metal badge on the CPA man's shirt. His eyes narrowed.

"What was Nick doing here, Art?" Reese asked.

"I—I don't know," Art said confusedly. "I reckon he came sneaking around to get the stuff he left. Shore, that's it."

"I'll need convincing on that point," Reese said meaningly. "Looks as if the little ranchers aren't the only ones who harbor outlaws."

King laughed, but it was forced.

"Shucks, Reese, yuh wouldn't doubt Art's word, would yuh?"

"You might call it that, King," Steve Reese answered flatly. His glance cut around to the circle of hard, tight faces. "There are too many gunhawks on this spread, and all too much involved in this whole mess for me to trust any man completely."

Art took an angry step forward but checked himself as he realized he faced the silent threat of Reese's guns. The CPA field chief holstered one and reached in his shirt pocket for the court order. He extended it to Art Barrett.

"As a peace officer of Quilado County, I'm serving this on the Arrow B. I intend to see that you obey it."

Art accepted the paper, asked someone to strike a match. He held the paper close and read it, his scowl deepening. At last he dropped his hand to his side, stood stiff and quivering with anger. He swallowed once or twice and finally spoke in a choked voice.

"You hold the aces at the moment, Reese. But the trumps are still out. Yuh'll do me a great favor by gettin' off the Arrow B."

Reese shook his head.

"Not yet, Barrett. I'm a lawman on duty. I intend to find out who killed Tom—and why. I intend to find out why Nick Mosely was here tonight. I intend to find out exactly how the Arrow B fights for the Muron grant."

Art's lips quivered and his face paled. Reese saw the gunhawks strain forward. A word would start gunsmoke against odds that even Steve Reese could not face. His hand tightened around his six that was lined on Art Barrett's heart. If that word was spoken, Barret would be the first on his way to Boot Hill.

"He needs blastin', Art," King growled, and the men strained forward.

ART BARRETT took a deep breath, expelled it gustily. His shoulders lost their ramrod stiffness and he managed a smile. He shook his head at King.

"Why, King, Reese is only doin' his duty. We have to help him all we can. The Arrow B is a law-abidin' spread. Reese, I don't know why Nick Mosely was here. I didn't know he was. This casts suspicion on us, and I'm sorry for it. But we'll do all we can to help yuh."

Reese said nothing, but looked slowly around at the gunhawks. Art understood the meaning of the look and his voice grew gruff as he sharply ordered the men to pick

up Mosely's body and get back to their quarters. King Olin shivered a little, then turned away toward the house.

Reese had won this encounter but the larger stakes were yet to come, he knew. He went to his room and made sure his Peacemakers were close to hand before he drifted off to a troubled sleep. One murder had already been done here, and Reese knew that only his vigilance would keep him out of Boot Hill.

The next morning, Art Barrett was all smiles. Once more he apologized for his anger and again insisted that Nick Mosely had slipped into the spread without his knowledge. Reese listened but made no statement as to whether he believed Art or not.

He rode into Quilado with the Arrow B man who drove the buckboard with Nick's body. In town, Reese turned the body over to Keever and explained what had happened. The deputy looked unhappy and puzzled.

"I never heard of so much gunsmoke," he sighed. "Yuh reckon Art knew Nick was around?"

"Undoubtedly," Reese answered. "But the trick is for us to prove it. At least, yuh can close the Lantry case. I wanted to get Nick alive. He could have told us more about the Aldag killing and fire, and maybe something about Tom Barrett's murder. We've still got a long way to go."

"And it gives me a cold sweat to think about it," Keever said. "Shore glad yuh're on the case, Reese."

Steve smiled his thanks and left the jail. He walked down to the little telegraph office and spent some time wording a wire to Colonel Beauvine at Austin. He asked that the CPA man in Washington make an immediate report if the Muron grant had been confirmed by any branch of the government, or if there would be any action in the near future on the surveyor's report.

Reese also asked that Grant Simpson be located and questioned as to the Quilado survey, particularly closely if the man seemed more prosperous than usual, dating from his stay in Quilado. Reese asked for speed. He finished his wire by writing:

I CAN'T HOLD THE LID DOWN MUCH LONGER, AND I'VE MANAGED IT SO FAR BY LUCK.

He felt better once the long telegram was on its way. He returned to the Arrow B and immediately a cloud of suspicion and dislike closed in about him. King Olin spoke only when forced to. The gunhawk crew watched Reese narrowly. Time and again they were openly insulting, and Reese felt they had instructions to pick a quarrel with him.

Art Barrett dared take no direct action against the lawman, but the gunmen crew could. Art would be duly regretful if Reese were killed in a gunfight and would undoubtedly prove in a court that Reese himself had started it.

All over the Quilado range there was an uneasy peace. Reese sensed it. The Arrow B men remained on their own territory, Art not yet defying the court order and injunction. But down beneath the surface trouble stirred. Reese could feel it.

He tried to get some further line on Tom Barrett's murder. He spent a day checking Tom's room again, going over it inch by inch. But there was no clue to be found as to the identity of the killer.

Steve Reese sank down on the bed and looked around, once again discounting the powder-burned handkerchief. It simply did not fit in, except to place Tex Gage under suspicion as a means of clearing the real killer. Reese was certain that the young lawman had not been near the Arrow B that night. But Reese was still far from knowing who actually had blasted the life from Tom Barrett.

He dared not question Hank Ball closely in the presence of the others, nor could he appear too interested in the redhead. He also wondered what Dusty Trail might have to report. He arose from the bed with a sigh. Despite the risk, it was time for a conference with his two aides.

THE next day he managed to pass word to Hank, setting the meeting for the following night at Quilado. Reese then rode over to the Milburn spread, where he was received as coldly and as with as much suspicion as was accorded him at the Arrow B.

"We ain't right shore of yuh," Milburn said flatly. "Yuh carry a CPA badge and we learned yuh was made a Quilado deputy. But yuh've checked every blame move we've made and we ain't no further now in bein' free of Barrett than we've ever been."

"Sounds like Walt Wythe has been talking again," Steve said.

"Maybe Walt has talked," Milburn said defensively. "But he's makin' a heap more sense than you do. You ask us to sit tight and do nothin'. Walt wants to fight for his rights on his own two legs. That shore listens good to the rest of us."

"Fight all you like with the law backing you," Reese answered, "and I'll also back

you straight through. But I'll tangle with any of you who goes gunning, burning or rustlin on his own. He would be no better than Nick Mosely or Tom Barrett's killer. He would deserve hanging, no matter what his motive."

"I see yore point," Milburn conceded, "but I can't say I like it. Yuh'd best get some results, Reese, and blamed soon. We're all gettin' mighty nervous watchin' the Arrow B get away with breakin' every law in the books."

Reese managed to get word to Dusty Trail about the meeting, then rode back to the Arrow B. His thoughts were not pleasant and he felt as though his hands were helplessly tied. He could find no lead that would pin guilt definitely on any man.

Reese also feared more than ever that Nick Mosely's death had completely erased the trail to the heart of the Quilado trouble. The swarthy gunhawk had undoubtedly known who had taken part in the Aldag raid and who had killed Tom. Now the man's lips were sealed forever.

CHAPTER XII

Blackmail

ON THE following night Steve Reese waited impatiently on the outskirts of town. He sat his horse just off the main trail so that a chance passerby would not see him. At last a rider ghosted up, halted and called softly into the night. Reese answered and Hank Ball joined him. In a few minutes more Dusty Trail came up and the three men silently rode away.

Reese called a halt when they were a safe distance from the road. Dusty lit a cigar, folded his hands on the saddle-horn. Hank Ball cuffed his hat-brim back from his face, waiting for Reese to speak. And Reese wasted no time in getting down to business.

"Dusty, what do the little ranchers plan to do?" he asked.

"I'll give Walt Wythe less'n a week to get his arguments across, Doc," Dusty said flatly. "Milburn and the rest is shore restless and Walt Wythe keeps sayin' yuh're workin' for Barrett. He claims it's useless for the little man to depend on you getting 'em any justice."

"How about Tom Barrett's murder? Any suspicion that Wythe or the others killed Tom Barrett?"

"None whatever, Doc. They all swear Tex Gage never done it, but they ain't got any idea who did. Fact is, they're sort of sorry it wasn't Art. Seems that Tom had a small streak of decency in him, but they figger Art is a skunk clean through."

"So do I," Steve Reese said.

"Wythe is shore preachin' hard," Dusty went on. "He says now's the time to teach Art Barrett a lesson and there won't be a better chance to whip the Arrow B claims. I'm tryin' hard to check his wild talk, Doc, but I ain't gettin' far. They figger I'm just an outsider and Walt swings a heap wider loop."

"How about Tex, Hank?" Reese turned to the redhead.

"Safe enough and plumb hid. I give him the warnin' and got back with the crew while they waited at the courthouse. They didn't suspect anything."

"Good." Reese nodded. "Be ready to produce him. How about Nick Mosely the night he tried a six-gun showdown? What was he doing on the spread?"

"Don't rightly know, Doc," Hank declared. "He drifted in after we come from Quilado and was with Art and King a long time. I reckon they figgered you'd stay in town and that Nick was safe. Everybody was shore surprised when yuh showed up."

"That's the way I figured it," Reese said. "What does the crew think?"

"The crew backs King Olin," Hank answered, "and they obey Art only because King tells 'em to. Art don't savvy that, of course. Doc, King Olin's got somethin' up his sleeve. He acts like a cat just about ready to steal hisself a dish of cream. Have yuh noticed how he's sort of swelled up with his own juice lately?"

"No," Reese said. "King and Art keep away from me as much as possible. What does the crew know about Tom's killing?"

"Not a blasted thing, Doc. They're all plumb lost. I'd say it was Nick Mosely, though I ain't figgered an answer to why yet."

Reese sighed.

"Blank walls wherever you turn. Have you noticed there's been no rustling since we landed in Quilado?"

"Not even talk of it," Hank answered, with a soft curse. "What do yuh aim to do, Doc?"

"I've sent a message to Colonel Beauvine, but there's no answer yet. All we can do is sit tight. Hank, keep yours ears and eyes

open. Dusty, keep trying to hold the small ranchers in line. If they start trouble now we might as well roll up our tents and go home."

"I'll try, Doc, but it ain't easy."

"Yuh might let 'em whiff them cigars yuh smoke," Hank drawled. "They'd be knocked out and couldn't do nothin'."

"Some day, yuh jughead," Dusty answered without rancor, "you'll get eddicated to a good cigar—if yuh get a new set of brains. Adios, Doc. I'll try holdin' Wythe and the boys."

He rode off, heading back for the Milburn spread. Hank and Steve Reese shook hands and the redhead reined around, riding for the Arrow B. Reese rode into Quilado where he asked if a message had come for him. There was none and he headed for the Barrett ranch.

It was late when he rode in. The ranchhouse was dark except for a light in the office. Reese unsaddled and turned his horse into the corral. He slipped quietly into the house and walked silently down the hall to his room. His hand was on the knob when he heard King Olin's voice raised.

"Yuh got to get rid of that lawman, Art! We can't do a thing with him around."

REESE realized then that the office door was open a crack. He stood still in the hall, listening. Art growled something he could not hear, then Art's voice rose.

"I'm handlin' Reese, all right! I'm still ramrodin' this spread, King, and I know what I'm doin'!"

"I shore hope yuh do," King answered. "So far, it ain't worked out so well. Nick's dead and Tex Gage is still roamin' around."

"Lantry's gone," Art answered, "and we haven't got the Runnin' A to worry about any more. Tex faces arrest the minute he shows his face. I think we've done all right, King."

"Mebbe," King answered, and was silent awhile. When he spoke again, a new note was in his voice. "Art, I reckon I ain't makin' enough dinero. There's been a heap of new risks added to the job. Yuh'd better raise my pay some."

"Impossible," Art snapped. "Yuh make enough now, not countin' the bonus you've got for a job or two."

"I ain't arguin', Art," King said flatly. "I want a raise. Mebbe I might decide to become yore partner."

"Are yuh crazy?" Art demanded.

King laughed and stirred.

"Not me, Art, and yuh know it. Kick in with the raise. If yuh don't I reckon I can tell a mighty interestin' story. There's a gent not far away that'd be pleased to hear it. Yuh wouldn't want me to do that, Art."

"Blackmail!" Art swore luridly, then was silent a moment. And when he did speak a weary note of surrender was in his voice. "All right, King, you win this time. But yuh might carry things too far."

Reese heard the men move and silently slipped into his own room, quietly closing the door behind him. In a moment he heard the jingle of King's spurs and the man's heavy tread as he walked down the hall.

The CPA field chief leaned against the door, his eyes glowing. His fist slowly clenched. If King Olin had nothing on Art Barrett, the gunhung segundo would never have got away with his demands. Art had correctly named it as blackmail.

Reese swung away from the door and walked across the dark bedroom to the window. He stared out on the shadowy patio.

"King and Art are deep in this," he thought. "King's power is based on what happened to Lantry, Aldag and Tom Barrett, because Art has handled the land claim openly, except for Simpson."

As Reese's knuckles pressed into the sill he was recalling an old trick that often worked. Plotters were always suspicious of their partners. Thought of treachery was never far from their minds. Reese intended to use that knowledge.

If he could sow seeds of suspicion in King Olin's mind, and in Art's at the same time, he might easily cause a fight between them. When liars and plotters started fighting among themselves, the truth generally came out.

"You might call it dynamiting," Reese thought, with a crooked grin, as he turned from the window. "I'll set the fuses right away."

Steve Reese had no chance with King Olin or Art Barrett the next day. Art busied himself in Quilado, going to a conference with his attorney. King Olin took most of the gunhawks, including Hank Ball, and the crew rode out on the range to check on the Arrow B herd. Reese was left alone at the spread and there was nothing he could do. Time dragged.

Late in the afternoon, Art came back but he shut himself up in his office. Reese waited, and at last knocked on the office door. He entered at Art's growled answer. The owner of the Arrow B glared at him.

"What do yuh want?" he demanded.

Reese chose to ignore his surliness. He

sat down in a chair, black eyes keenly watching Art's face.

"I'm making a little progress," he said blandly. "I thought you'd like to know. I think I'll know in a few days who raided Aldag's spread along with Nick Mosely."

Art swung around sharply, then checked himself. He smiled.

"I'm glad to hear that, Reese," he said. "I never figgered we'd ever learn about that."

"Oh, there's always someone in a crowd like that who'll sell out," Reese said easily, and Art's eyes narrowed. Reese changed the subject easily, shrewdly guessing the effect on Barrett. "How much do you trust Olin?"

"King?" Art answered, though his eyes probed at Reese as though trying to read the motives behind the question. He leaned forward. "Fully. Why do yuh ask?"

"Just a passing thought," Reese said, and arose.

He had planted the first hints of suspicion and he was certain they would grow in Art's mind. He turned to the door but paused when he heard the rapid thrum of hoofs in the yard. Art swung to the window.

"Somethin's wrong!" he exclaimed.

KING Olin came striding down the hall, his face dark and angry. He brushed by Reese and came to a halt before the desk.

"Them blasted rustlers have struck again!" he said. "One hundred prime head of Arrow B run off and the trail plumb lost."

Art's face twisted in fury.

"Where was the crew?"

"That water-backed bunch of rannies!" King sneered. "They was sleepin' their fool heads off. If yuh'd let me put my boys to watchin' the beef, yuh'd not lose any."

Art's fist pounded down on the desk. He glared up at Reese and his lips twisted back from his white teeth.

"Mr. Lawman," he said with heavy sarcasm, "can my boys go out after the herd and the rustlers? Am I permitted to leave my spread to report this to the sheriff?"

Reese flushed, but held his temper.

"You can trail all you want, Barrett, and you know it. But don't jump to conclusions and start shooting up any spread on suspicion only."

"We're riding to Quilado, King," Art snapped. "I'll see if Keever will give us more rope than the tin badge we have with us. Mebbe Judge Colmar will revoke the writ, since rustlers can help themselves to the whole Arrow B as it stands."

He came to his feet and buckled on his gun-belt. Brushing by Reese, he strode down the hall. King Olin grinned wickedly at the field chief and his fingers brushed his gun butt.

"Hold down the spread, lawman," he drawled, "and keep the Chinese cook plumb legal. Mebbe he ain't got a warrant to kill one of our chickens. Yuh'd better check on that."

King was gone. Steve Reese felt the angry flush leave his face as he followed more slowly down the hall. By the time he had stepped into the yard, Art, King, and most of the crew had streamed down the trail toward Quilado.

Reese leaned against the door post, thinking. Art had been honestly surprised and angered by the news of the rustling and Reese had to discard a suspicion he had held for some time. Art was not rustling his own cows to keep the country stirred up as an excuse to move against the small ranchers.

Reese caught sight of Hank's lean figure near the corral and the redhead made a swift signal, moved around the corral to the back of the barn and into the maze of stock pens. Reese remained where he was for some time, then moved aimlessly toward the cookshack. He circled the shack and walked idly toward the barn.

A small group of Arrow B gunslammers stood before the bunkhouse door but they paid no attention to Reese. They were used to seeing him around now. He walked the length of the barn and toward the stockpens and saw that no one was watching him. He idled down the main aisle to the far end where he could not be seen from the ranchyard, and heard Hank's low hiss.

The redhead sat hunkered down against the fence in the last pen. Reese joined him. Hank grinned crookedly, then chuckled.

"We had us a rustlin'," he said, and chuckled again. "Art lost a heap of beef."

"To whom?" Reese asked.

"To King Olin," Hank answered and the field chief's start of surprise sent the redhead to chuckling again. Then Hank's smile vanished. "It's a dirty, doublecrossin' setup, Doc. King must have decided I was all right, because he had me ride along. We hit up toward the north line where some of the cattle was grazin'. Went like clock-work. Some of the boys choused the cattle direct west. No trouble. King had ordered the line riders plumb away from there."

"Where'd you drive the beef?"

"Not far from the mountains to the west, Doc. A crew met us when we was nearly

there and yuh'd never guess who headed 'em."

"No." Reese shook his head. "I'll not try. There have been too blamed many surprises already."

"It was the fire-eatin' gent that rode in here with Milburn and Dusty. Walt Wythe and King Olin was plumb friendly. They had a long talk but I couldn't get close to hear what they said. Acted like they'd done this before and some of the boys said they had."

"Walt Wythe!" Reese whistled.

"Later King called me over and told me I'd get my cut of the beef," Hank said. "He'd decided I was all right, he said. I asked him how he figgered on gettin' away with it."

"What did he say?"

"He just laughed," Hank answered, "and said it had been done before and would be done again. King hinted that Quilado was kept stirred up on purpose, so's King could chouse off the beef, putin' the blame on the small ranchers. Wythe gets a share for handlin' the cows and sellin' em. He shore is a snake, Doc."

"And a smart one," Steve Reese said slowly. "I never would have figured this angle in the case."

"King hinted Art couldn't do much if he did find out who stole the beef," Hank went on. "I reckon he's got somethin' on Barrett, though he ain't playin' it till he's forced to."

"I'm beginnin' to see light," Reese said slowly. "I reckon I'd better ride to Quilado myself. Keep up the good work, Hank. You've just about tied up the case for us."

"Be careful yuh ain't seen," Hank warned. "I wouldn't like to be caught right now. I figger I can learn a heap now that King has decided I'm an owlhooter."

REESE smiled, nodded and cautiously arose. There was no one around and once again he strolled aimlessly toward the barn. When he rounded the building, he saw that the gunmen were still grouped around the bunkhouse door. Only one man's glance passed over him, and that was completely disinterested.

Reese went to the corral, roped and saddled his horse. He rode out of the yard, paying no attention to the gunhawks who idly watched him. He saw Hank hunkered down at one corner of the bunkhouse, idly whittling on a piece of wood.

As soon as Reese was out of sight of the Arrow B he cut off of the road so that he would not meet Art Barrett and King Olin coming back from town. He cut across the range at a fast clip and reached Quilado in record time. He saw no sign of Art and King, still he ghosted up to the rear of the jail instead of boldly approaching it from the front.

Keever was cramming cartridges in a rifle, getting ready to go on the trail of the rustlers. Reese told what he knew of the business and the deputy placed the rifle on his desk. His face showed anger.

"From what yuh tell me," he said, "I reckon I know about where them cows are. So that's Walt Wythe's game, playin' both ends against the middle!"

"It's King Olin's, too," Reese said. "I'm expecting a wire that might give us more of a line on Art Barrett. Wait until I check with the telegraph office."

Keever went with him. There was a wire waiting from Colonel Beauvine. Reese read it and his lips flattened. He passed the message to Keever and the deputy swore under his breath.

"So Grant Simpson was bought out by the Barretts! He faked a survey to fit their claims."

"I suspected that," Reese said, as he nodded. "At my suggestion the CPA man in Washington got busy. Simpson was arrested in St. Louis by a US Marshal and they want Art Barrett. The Land Office has now decided, because of the fake survey and the tricky way the Barretts played, to grant no portion of the Muron claim. In other words, Keever, the Barretts are whipped and the small ranchers have clear titles to their spreads."

"What about Wythe?" Keever asked, and Reese tugged at his lower lip.

"Pick him up. Catch him with the stolen cows if you can. I'm riding out to the Arrow B. Bring Wythe there for a showdown. I think we'll get at the heart of a lot of questions when Wythe talks."

"There's not the slightest doubt of it," Keever said. "But how are you going to make Wythe talk?"

Steve Reese considered for several moments. There were Indian methods to make a man talk, but the CPA was above their use. But Reese as well as Keever knew that somebody in the case had to crack up.

If finding the lost stock would help, then the rustled herd must be picked up as soon as possible. Time was of essence.

"I'm leaving Wythe to you," Reese told the law man. "He's your catch."

"What about you?" Keever asked.

"I'll work out my end," the CPA man said.

CHAPTER XIII

Showdown

KEEVER and Reese parted, Reese streaking back toward the Arrow B. Not far from the spread, he slowed his pace and rode into the ranch-yard as though there were little on his mind. King Olin had just left the bunkhouse and Reese called him.

"The Quilado trouble is about washed up," Reese said. King's eyes narrowed. "I got a new line on the rustlers and I think they'll turn up pretty close to home."

"What do yuh mean?" King demanded.

Reese chuckled and leaned forward, his voice dropping to a whisper.

"Tell you later. And something else—Art says he wants to see me about Tom's killing. I might clean up that murder before long, King, and I've got an idea that Tex Gage won't be arrested for it. Depends on what Art has to say. Don't say anything, King. I think I can trust you."

"Shore," King said, a little lamely. "Shore—I won't say a word to nobody."

Satisfied, Reese unsaddled. He went to his room and remained there with the hall door open a crack. Dark came but he didn't light the lamp. The dynamite was set and the explosion should come soon.

Time passed slowly and Reese began to wonder if he had played his cards right. But he knew Art was in the office and that the only approach to it was along the hall he was watching.

Hank Ball had met Reese at the corral and the redhead was watching the office window. Reese moved slightly and stretched his cramped muscles, but he told himself he had to be right. It was the only answer, and yet the killer had made no move.

When the shots did come they ripped out like thunder. Reese was in the hall before they had stopped echoing. They had come from outside the house. Reese had a glimpse of Art's startled face at the office door, then the CPA man had rushed on, down the hall, and outside.

As he slammed open the door, he saw King Olin, the segundo, holding a smoking gun in his hand. He also saw that Hank had fallen and fear for his partner clawed at his throat. King Olin swung around, and his gun barrel tilted up. Desperately Steve Reese threw himself to one side, his fingers clawing for his Colt.

He had unmasked the killer, but Hank had paid the price. Only unbelievable speed now would save Steve Reese himself.

King's lead tugged at Reese's shirt. The CPA field chief faded fast to one side, so that the light from the doorway no longer framed him. King turned with him, lips snarled back as he stood in a crouch, the gun in his hand spitting death. His second shot sent a shower of stucco flying.

Steve Reese's gun cleared leather. King fired fast, depending on quick triggering to down his opponent, but Reese took that fraction of time to place his shot. His finger pressed back on the trigger.

King whirled half around, his gun arm going limp as Reese's slug smashed into his shoulder. He gave the weapon a quick toss to his left hand as he fought to keep from staggering.

King's face looked wolfish, and there was something desperate in his eyes. He was still a killer and as dangerous as a maddened rattler. Steve Reese crouched by the door and again his Peacemaker roared. King came up on his toes, took a couple of mincing steps forward and collapsed. The gun flew from his fingers and he lay still.

Slowly Reese straightened and advanced toward the fallen segundo. He did not notice Hank stir. Art Barrett appeared in the doorway and a shouted alarm sounded from the bunkhouse. Art held a six in his hand and the barrel was lined on Steve Reese's broad back.

"Lift 'em high, Reese, and turn around!" he snarled.

Reese whirled, saw the black gun muzzle lined on his chest. He had no chance to beat Art in a gunsmoke showdown, and also he heard the pounding boots of the hired gunmen streaming up from the bunkhouse.

Reese spoke calmly.

"King was after your hide, Art. He's still alive. You'd better have someone look after him."

"Why?" Art asked coldly, as his eyes narrowed. "Mebbe I want him in Boot Hill."

"I can understand that," Reese said.

The men came up, plowed to a halt when they saw the two sprawled figures and the CPA man standing under the threat of Art's gun. Barrett's glance briefly flicked over the wolf faces.

"Reese killed King Olin," he said. "I reckon we know what to do. There's a big

tree beyond the barn."

"Get a rope!" someone yelled and men ran eagerly back to the bunkhouse.

Rough hands grabbed Reese and the guns were jerked from his holsters. The whole play had broken so fast that Reese realized he faced utter defeat. Hank was already downed and Art Barrett intended that Reese himself should be silenced.

REESE stood tight-lipped, making no effort to throw off the hands that held him. There was no use and he knew it. He could only wait and hope for the smallest ghost of a break. Resolutely he kept his eyes from Hank's still form.

As he was hustled toward the bunkhouse he saw a man appear momentarily in the doorway, carrying a coiled lariat. Art Barrett came striding behind the men. Back at the ranchhouse, two bodies lay still and inert. As the crowd moved away and around the barn, one of them stirred, pushed itself up.

Hank Ball's narrowed eyes gleamed savagely. King Olin moaned but the redhead paid him no attention. He scooped up his sixes and hastily shoved fresh cartridges in the chambers. His side burned and the belt band of his trousers was stained with blood, but he pressed his lips tightly, fighting the pain.

He started toward the barn, hand clutched against his side. He edged around it and saw the big tree, shadowy in the night. Men busied themselves building a fire there and soon the flames leapt high. Steve Reese sat straight and granite-jawed atop a horse beneath a limb, the noose already around his neck. The renegade named Snake tossed the rope up over the limb, pulled it tight and looked around at Art Barrett.

"Lash it," Art ordered with an evil chuckle, "so he won't fall when he gets up there."

Two men moved to Snake's side, ready to whip the horse into motion with their hats. Hank Ball leaned against the barn, not trusting his wounded side. His guns lined down, one on Art and the other on Snake.

"Yore party is over, hombres," he said.

Art spun around. Snake jumped to one side, hand slashing to his holster. Hank's gun blasted and Snake sagged against the tree and fell limp. The rest froze. Hank's voice carried firm and clear.

"Drop yore six, Barrett. Lift that noose off Reese and cut them ropes. Pronto!"

Art Barrett, face white and strained, opened his fingers and the gun dropped to the ground. The men stood straining forward but they dared not buck the steady twin guns that menaced them. Art moved to Reese's horse, reached up and slashed the rope that bound his arms. Reese hastily lifted the noose from his head and swung out of saddle. For a fraction of a second, he stood between Hank and Art Barrett.

Barrett moved then with the speed of a striking snake. His arms clenched around Reese. His voice lifted in a yell.

"Get that red-headed son!"

Instantly perdition broke loose. A dozen guns blasted, sending a hail of lead toward the barn. Hank had dropped flat, but his sixes roared with steady precision. Two men dropped, and a third had his legs knocked out from under him. Hank's face held a reckless light as he returned the enemy fire.

Steve Reese twisted around savagely, trying to free himself from Art Barrett's grasp. He managed to work his elbow and arm as a lever, and succeeded in partially freeing himself. His fist pounded up and landed a glancing blow in Art's face. Barrett's head snapped back and his grip was wholly broken. He caught himself and came boring in, fists pumping like pistons. There was desperation and fury in his dark face.

Reese met the rush, but could not check it. He was driven back, though he rained blows on Art's face and ribs. Barrett seemed impervious to pain. Dimly Reese heard the blast of shots around him as Art looped in a blow that was parried and the CPA field chief landed a solid punch to his opponent's jaw.

The man went down, arms outflung. His fingers touched the gun he had dropped and curled around it. Desperately Reese threw himself forward in a flying tackle. He thudded atop Barrett, fingers grabbing for the man's gun wrist as the muzzle swept around. Savagely he jerked and the gun exploded. Power particles burned Reese's face but he hung grimly on. Barrett tried to wrench free, using knees and fist.

Hank fired desperately to keep the gunhawks at bay. His guns spat constantly and finally the hammers clicked on empty chambers. The redhead cursed as the gunslammers yelled in triumph and came forward, though still cautious.

They did not hear the cavalcade come pounding through the main gate until the first of the horsemen swept around the corner of the barn, guns spitting from his pudgy fists, his sleepy round face grim and tight. Behind him rode Keever, Milburn and Tex Gage. Out by the gate, a beautiful girl

sternly watched Walt Wythe, tied and cursing as he sat on his horse.

Steve Reese's shoulder muscles swelled and bunched as he gradually forced Art's gun away from his body. The man cursed and the gun exploded again. Art worked his knees higher and, with a mighty surge, threw Reese backward, breaking the lawman's hold. Reese rolled, coming to a halt beside Snake's limp body.

ART scrambled to his knees, face wild. Steve Reese saw the gun swing toward him. Snake's holstered six was close and the field chief grabbed for the weapon. Art's shot was wild, thudding into Snake so that the body jerked. Reese freed the six from leather and his wrist lined the muzzle on Art. He pulled the trigger.

Art jerked, remained on his knees staring in infinite surprise at Reese. He opened his mouth to say something, then his lips snapped shut in a spasm of pain. Red stained his white shirt front. He tried to lift the Colt but it was too heavy. His head dropped forward and he fell on his face.

The gunmen had broken and scattered as Dusty, Milburn and the rest of the mounted men hit them. Some of them were downed in a flurry of gunshots. Most of them scattered for the sheltering dark of the open range. The battle was over with startling suddenness.

Steve Reese hurried to the corner of the barn where he found Dusty bending over Hank. The fat man looked up and smiled, though it was a bit strained.

"He's been hit a couple of times, Doc, but he's all right. Yuh cain't kill a redhead, I've decided."

Keever's voice hailed Reese from the yard.

"Reese! King Olin wants to talk to yuh. Pronto!"

Steve hurried around the barn and up to the door of the ranchhouse. He bent over King Olin, who smiled wanly and made a weak gesture of surrender. Cold sweat stood in beads on his forehead but his voice sounded strong enough.

"Looks like yuh cleaned the board, Reese, includin' me. When that red-headed waddy cut down on me, I knew then I had been tricked, complete. You knew Tex Gage didn't kill Tom, and yuh had an idea who did. Yuh was right. I did it."

"Why?" Reese asked.

"Ask Art," King gasped through a spasm of pain.

"Art's dead," Reese said, "but I think I know the answer. Art was afraid that Tom was too much in love with Karen Lantry to see the game through. Art knew that both he and Tom faced long Federal prison terms on that Muron survey, so Art figured Tom would be safer in Boot Hill. You did the job for him, and it gave you a hold over Art that you'd been wanting for a long time."

"That's right." King nodded slightly. "Mosely picked the fight with Lantry on Art's order and it was Art who decided to burn Bob Aldag down."

"We've also got Walt Wythe a prisoner," Reese said, and King blinked. The smile returned.

"Then yuh know about the rustlin'."

"Most of it," Reese said. "You worked with Walt Wythe and kept the little ranchers in a constant state of anger and uproar. You saw to it that Art heard about it and Art's acts were such that he expected retaliation.

"That is how you and Walt, were able to run off Arrow B beef to your holding ground in the mountains. They were sold after the brands were changed and all of you made considerably more than your gun wages."

King coughed, checked himself.

"Yuh're right, Reese. If yuh got Walt, I reckon he'll talk. He always had more wind than backbone. I reckon I ought to go out

[*Turn page*]

Kidneys Must Remove Excess Acids

Help 15 Miles of Kidney Tubes Flush Out Poisonous Waste

If you have an excess of acids in your blood, your 15 miles of kidney tubes may be overworked. These tiny filters and tubes are working day and night to help Nature rid your system of excess acids and poisonous waste.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Kidneys may need help the same as bowels, so ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

Adv.

hatin' yuh, Reese. But I don't. Yuh're—a blamed good man—and a smart one. I reckon—"

His head suddenly lolled forward and he was dead. Steve Reese slowly straightened. Dusty and Keever came up, carrying an improvised stretcher. Hank grinned at Reese and waved his hand. Tex Gage and Karen Lantry rode up, with Walt Wythe between them. Reese shook the young lawman's hand.

"She's been hidin' me, Reese, and I've done talked her into gettin' hitched."

Steve laughed and then sobered.

"How did you happen to come along?"

"Keever came to Milburn for help in rounding up Walt Wythe. That news shore bowled all of us over. We never figgered Walt as a renegade. Karen told me and I figgered it was time I took a hand. Technically, I'm a prisoner, but Keever returned my guns to help him round up Walt Wythe and the rustlers. We got 'em all. They figgered they were safe and we were in the camp before they knew what hit them."

"You're free of Tom's murder," Reese said. "You always were in my opinion, but I needed proof. I got Art and King suspicious of one another. King decided to kill Art to save his own hide and walked into the trap. He confessed to his guilt, and Art's. One thing I still don't savvy is how your handkerchief got in Tom's bedroom."

IT WAS only after Keever, Reese and Dusty had grilled Walt Wythe that the puzzle of the handkerchief was cleared up. Acting on King's orders, Walt had called on Tex Gage with a trumped-up complaint against the Arrow B. Walt had stolen the handkerchief then, passing it on to King.

"Premeditated murder, rustling, burning, gunplay—Quilado had them all," Reese said. "King, Art and Tom are dead and I reckon we can say that they paid for their sins. Of course, Lantry and Aldag were just victims of a ruthless, power-hungry man—Art Barrett."

A week later, Hank Ball was able to be in the saddle again. The Federal Marshal had come to Quilado, to find that death had taken the men he had come for. But at least Grant Simpson waited in jail for his trial. The Arrow B was held liable for suit by the small ranchers as a means of regaining the money and lands they had lost. With Walt Wythe safely in jail, there seemed little chance that Quilado would again be torn apart by war.

The ranchers, under the leadership of Ben Milburn, decided to give a public demonstration in honor of the three CPA men. There was no arguing with Milburn. Quilado was to celebrate. That night three men paused before the jail and Steve Reese went inside. Tex Gage looked up from his desk.

"Tell Milburn," Reese said, "that we sure appreciate the celebration he planned, but we've got to get back to Austin."

"But yuh have to stay," Tex exclaimed. "We all want to thank yuh."

"It's thanks enough, Tex, when you can wind up a job and see justice brought to a range like Quilado. It makes you feel good inside, and there's no thanks like that. We'll just say adios and ride on. Tell Milburn how we feel. He'll understand."

Tex shook his hand, then went outside to say good-by to Hank and Dusty. The young sheriff stood watching the three ride off down the street. Light from a store window fell across their lean, tan faces and then they faded into the darkness beyond. Tex shook his head.

"There goes three fightin' fools, and three gents that's fit to ride the river with. Too bad the world ain't got more like 'em."

He sighed and turned back to the office. The three range riders left the last of Quilado behind them and their faces were eager as they headed out on the adventure trail, leaving a good job well done, behind them.

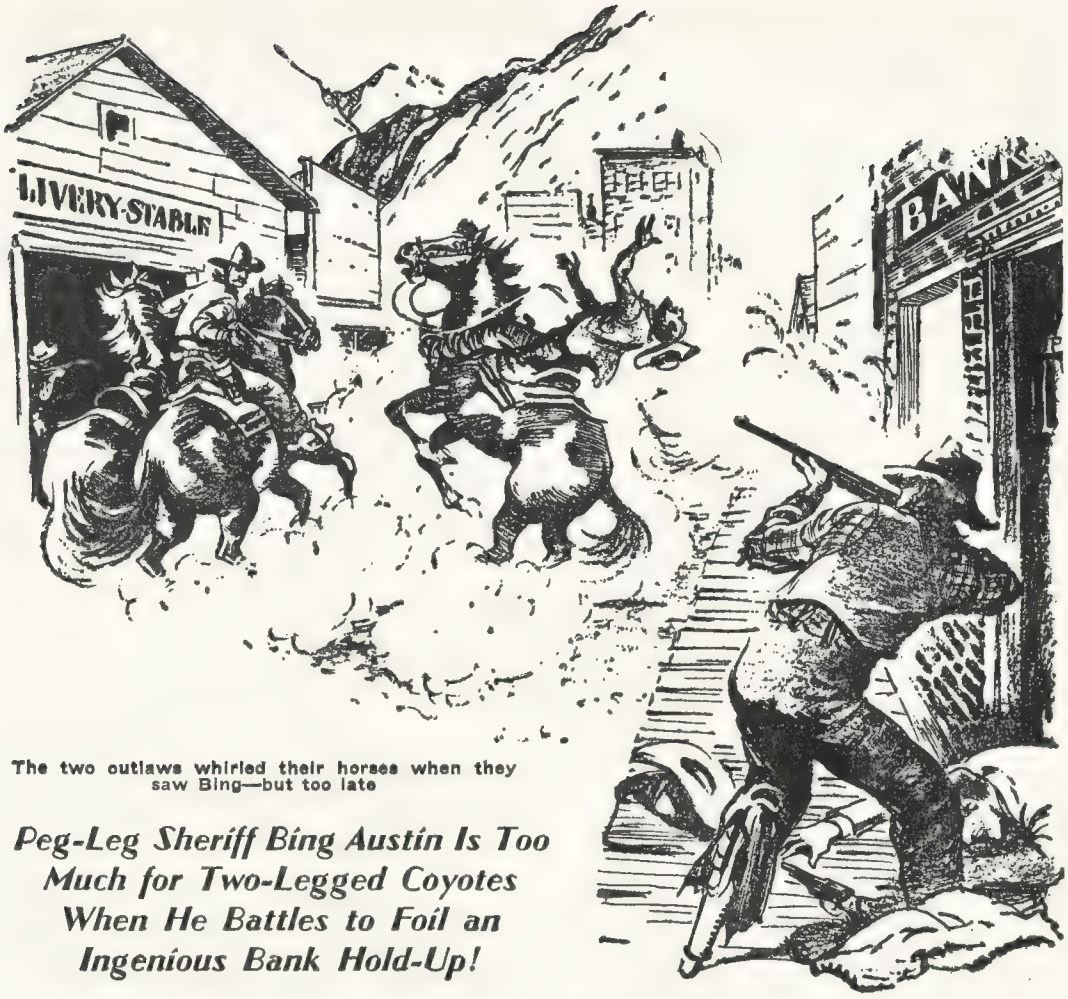
FURTHER EXCITING EXPLOITS OF STEVE REESE, HANK BALL AND DUSTY TRAIL IN

GUNS ALONG THE BRAZOS

A Swift-Moving Complete Action Novel

By TOM CURRY

NEXT ISSUE!



The two outlaws whirled their horses when they saw Bing—but too late

Peg-Leg Sheriff Bing Austin Is Too Much for Two-Legged Coyotes When He Battles to Foil an Ingenious Bank Hold-Up!

Lawmen Are Made, Not Born

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

THE Paulina County Court was meeting, as usual, in Banker Ed Crawley's private office. Crawley was one of the county commissioners, and, as usual, he was doing the talking.

Mose Younger, the county judge, was there. So was Doc Hyman, the other commissioner. Neither had opened his mouth since he had come in, except to say howdy. To make it more as usual, it had been Crawley who had called the meeting. The only thing that kept it from being perfectly as usual was the presence of Sheriff "Bing" Austin.

Bing didn't like Crawley. He didn't like a man who tried to run things the way Crawley did, and he particularly didn't like a man who succeeded in running things the way Crawley did. So Bing sat hunched over in his chair, and cluttered up the floor with the long shavings he was slicing from a pine board. Crawley liked things immaculate, so he wouldn't like what Bing was doing. That was exactly the reason Bing was working so industriously on the whittling job.

Bing hadn't looked at Crawley for five minutes. If he did look up, he would probably do something foolish like toss his knife at Crawley, and he wasn't that mad. Not yet. So Bing kept on whittling, and wondered why Paulina County needed a county judge and another commissioner when it had Ed Crawley.

"Paulina County has never been better off

financially than it is right now," Crawley was saying.

He sat tipped back in his chair, long legs extended in front of him, stone-gray eyes on the ceiling as if he knew no one in the room would argue with him.

"After a man has served Paulina County as long and faithfully as Bing Austin has," he went on, "it is by no means fair that we should forget him. I should say, Bing, that a small business is what you need. Something like a restaurant, or perhaps a harness shop. Or say a hotel. I believe you have been unable to save much money from your sheriff's salary."

Crawley paused, and eyed Mose Younger a moment as if he weren't quite sure how the judge would take his suggestion.

"I've always tried to make it a rule to base my loans on character," Crawley continued then, "rather than the amount of property a man owns. I certainly would be willing to grant you such a loan, Bing, one big enough to set you up in a paying business. But gentlemen, I feel that Paulina County should do something for Bing in consideration of his services in wiping out Tod Orchard's gang. My suggestion is that we grant Bing a lifetime pension, starting at the time of his resignation. Dale Russek could be appointed sheriff until the people act at the elections next fall."

THAT was too much. The pine board clattered to the floor between Bing's legs. He made a wild sweep with his knife, and jabbed it into his left leg. It stuck there, the handle quivering for a moment. Crawley stared at Bing open-mouthed as if he expected blood to start pouring from a wound.

"Hod dang it, Crawley!" Bing bellowed. "I don't want yore blasted old pension! I didn't ask for no loan. I'm sheriff, and I'm goin' to stay sheriff till the people of Paulina County vote me out. I ain't goin' to resign. Yuh can just put that in yore pipe and smoke it!"

Crawley swallowed. He looked at Doc Hyman and Mose Younger, and then at Bing. There was a pained expression on his thin face as if he considered it nothing less than treason to be spoken to in that manner.

"But Bing," he said persuasively, "you've got a wooden leg. You can't ride around over the county like you used to. You've been the best sheriff Paulina County ever had. It seems to me that the wise thing for you to do is to resign now before something comes up that you can't handle, and thereby lose your fine reputation."

"Yuh're tryin' to butter me up like a piece of toast," Bing snapped, "but it don't go. Mebbe I can't ride good, but I can still set in a buggy. Yuh're tryin' to make out I'm an old has-been. I'm thirty-two, and I ain't done by no manner of means." He slapped the star on his shirt front. "That's stayin' there!"

Crawley's face hardened. "I hate to say this, Bing, but Dale Russek's been your deputy long enough to know what your job entails. He's strong and able-bodied. He'd make a far more capable sheriff than you can be in your condition."

Bing jerked the knife from his wooden leg, snapped the blade shut, and shoved it into his pocket.

"Dale Russek will make a good lawman one of these days," Bing said, "but he ain't a good one yet. He's been my deputy for six months. Yuh got to train a lawman same as anybody else. Mose, yuh're a cattleman and a good one. Yuh've been in the business all yore life. Yuh think yuh could learn it in six months?"

"No, I don't," Younger admitted. "There's plenty I don't know yet."

"You, Doc"—Bing glared at Hyman—"yuh're a crackin' good sawbones. Yuh had to be, or I'd be a dead duck right now. I get all shot to pieces when I take on the Orchard bunch. Reckon folks figgered I was dead when they picked me up. Yuh took my leg, but yuh saved my life. Yuh reckon yuh learned how to do that in six months?"

"No." Hyman shook his hearded head. "I'm like Mose. I'm still learning."

"Mebbe you know all there is to know about the banking business, Crawley," Bing snapped, "but bein' a lawman's different. It takes nerve and straight shootin', shore, but that ain't all. Yuh've got to notice a lot of little things that most folks don't notice. If yuh don't, yuh make some bad mistakes that cost lives. Yuh can arrest the wrong man, or let the right man go, and one's as bad as the other. Dale ain't learned that, and yuh can't expect him to in six months."

Crawley's face might have been granite.

"Austin," he said harshly, "I've tried to be fair with you, but you won't have it. There is nothing left for the county court to do but ask for your resignation. I have people's money entrusted to me. I can't afford to gamble on a bad job of law enforcing with the Beauty Kid working in northern Nevada."

"For once yuh're talkin' sense. The Beauty Kid is plenty smart. Yuh got a pile of cash in yore safe?"

"More than Paulina County can afford to lose."

"Then I'll see what I can do about keepin' it there."

Bing Austin picked up his cane, and stamped out, his wooden leg cracking sharply against the bank floor.

Doc Hyman's bearded face broke into a grin.

"I was wondering how long Bing was goin' to sit there quiet like. You're a good banker, Ed, but I don't see why, knowing human nature the way you do."

"There's nothing funny about this, Doc," Crawley said coldly. "We've got to get rid of Austin, one way or another."

Bing Austin thumped down the boardwalk while anger cooled within him. Much of what Ed Crawley had said was true. It took a tough, two-fisted sheriff to rod Paulina County, and a man with a wooden leg could be neither tough nor two-fisted.

Word was already out among the long-riders what had happened to him. It would be worse before it was better, and it was still months before election. Bing had no intention of running again, but he wasn't resigning now because Ed Crawley told him to.

In another six months Dale Russek would be better than an average lawman. Bing Austin would quit when his term was out, and not a day sooner.

Bing turned in at "Buck" Grady's restaurant, and took a back table. He had noted the two pinto horses racked in front, and wondered whose they were. The brands were unfamiliar to him, and he hadn't known there were two pinto horses in Paulina County.

Buck Grady came up to Bing's table.

"Howdy, Sheriff," he said affably. "What'll yuh have today?"

GRADY was a new man in Saddle Rock. He had never said where he came from, or what he had done before he drifted into town and paid Ma Dunn a good price for her restaurant. Of one thing Bing was sure. Grady had never run a restaurant before. He was paying Ma Dunn big money to keep her on as cook.

"Got some good steak?" Bing asked.

"Shore have." Grady grinned. "You know Ma's cookin'."

Grady grinned easily. His dead-fish eyes had a way of looking at everybody, and nobody in particular.

"Reckon I'll have steak then," Bing said.

After Grady had gone back into the kitchen, Bing saw Dale Russek sitting at the end of the counter. Like Bing, Dale always ate his noon meal here, and unless he was out of town on a job, he never varied five minutes from twelve o'clock. For an instant anger flamed again in Bing Austin, and died. There was no use blaming Dale. He was a good boy, and loyal. Chances were he wouldn't take the sheriff's job if Crawley did succeed in boosting Bing out.

Half a dozen other men were perched on the stools. Two were strangers, the rest Paulina County men whom Bing knew well. The strangers were sitting next to Dale. Tough-looking men, Bing saw, with a week's growth of beard on their faces, and the dust of hard travel on them. Bing guessed that the pinto horses belonged to them, and his curiosity was stirred as it always was when he spotted strangers who looked as if they were in a hurry.

Grady had come back from the kitchen.

"That was a bad stage hold-up over in Bent River County," he said loudly. "Yuh hear about it, Dale?"

"No," Russek said, and looked up from his plate.

"Yep," Grady went on, "it was a lollapalazoo. They got ten thousand or better out of the strong-box. Shot the driver and guard. I reckon the Bent River sheriff'll be along right soon hot on their trail. There was two of 'em, and they was ridin' pinto horses. I dunno why they had them kind of broncs. They'd shine up like a prairie fire on a dark night. I'm betting you and the sheriff'll have a job, Dale."

"We'll be ready if they show up here," Dale said.

Quietly the two strangers had slid off their stools. They were outside and mounted before Dale Russek saw them. He took a quick look through the window just as the men dug in the steel, and went down the street in a cloud of dust.

He slipped off his stool and came back to Bing.

"Them hombres are ridin' pinto broncs," Dale said softly, "and they didn't finish their grub. They just ambled out when Grady began talkin'. Yuh reckon they're the jaspers he was talkin' about?"

Bing hadn't missed a move.

"Could be, Dale," he said quietly. "Just set tight for a minute, and see what happens."

Grady had gone to the window.

"Sheriff," he said, as loud as before, "did

yuh see them huckleberries? They shore looked like tough hands."

"They did for a fact," Bing said. "How about that steak?"

"I reckon it's ready," Grady said, and went into the kitchen.

"Mebbe I ought to hightail out after them two," Dale said worriedly.

"Set tight," Bing said again. "Finish yore meal."

Bing had started on his steak when a rider thundered into town from the opposite direction the two men had taken. He reined to a stop in front of the jail across the street from the restaurant.

"Sheriff!" he bawled.

"There's yore sheriff," Grady called. "It's just like I said. He's after them fellers."

Dale went through the door before Grady finished talking, the rest of the men behind him. Bing took another bite of steak before he followed.

The stranger packed a star, and his horse was lather-coated. He, like the two men who had left on the pinto horses, hadn't shaved for several days, and trail dust lay heavily upon him.

"Did a couple of tough-looking hombres ride through this town?" the stranger demanded. "They was toppin' pinto hosses, and likely looked like they'd come quite a ways."

"They just pulled out!" Grady said excitedly. "They was in my restaurant eatin' when I started tellin' about the hold-up in Bent River County. All of a sudden they got up and lit out on their pinto hosses."

"That's them!" the lawman roared, and swore. His eyes caught Bing Austin's star. "You the sheriff?"

Bing nodded.

"I'm Sheriff Webb from Bent River," the stranger snapped, "and I'll need some help. Them two killed a driver and guard on the Bent River stage, and got away with ten thousand. I've been chasin' 'em for three days. They're tough hands, and I don't care to take 'em on alone."

"Yuh'll get help," Bing said, and nodded at Dale Russek. "Reckon yuh'd better ride, Dale."

"Shore," Russek said, and headed for the livery stable.

"Ain't you goin'?" Webb demanded, and then seemed to remember something. "Say, yuh're the hombre that lost a leg in the scrap with Tod Orchard's bunch, ain't yuh?"

"Yeah," Bing said. "Yuh won't miss me. Dale's a good man."

"We ought to have more'n two," Webb said. "They're plenty tough, them jiggers."

HIS eyes swept the crowd around him. Practically every man in Saddle Rock was there.

"I need all of yuh," he announced. "Yuh're plumb blamed lucky them varmints didn't take a crack at yore bank. Yuh'll all be a heap safer when we run 'em down. Saddle up, and get a move on. Them fellers ain't lettin' no grass grow under their feet."

"Yuh reckon one of 'em was the Beauty Kid?" Bing asked.

"Nope," Webb snapped. "The Beauty Kid's way over in Idaho by now. I don't know who these fellers were. A couple of tough punchers that figgered on grabbin' some easy dinero, I reckon. They shore hit the jack-pot when they stopped that stage."

Five minutes later the heavily armed cavalcade swept out of Saddle Rock, leaving Bing, grizzled old Mike Zachary, the liveryman, and Buck Grady standing on the boardwalk. Ed Crawley hadn't left his bank.

"Looks like we're about the size of this pueblo's male population," Bing said, "except for Crawley and Joe Evans over in the depot. How come you didn't go, Grady?"

"I'm kind of like you and Mike," Grady said, and stared longingly after the posse. "I ain't much good on a hoss. Mebbe we ought to get a buckboard and foller that outfit. I'm purty handy with a hogleg."

"We wouldn't do much in a buckboard," Bing said. "How'd yuh hear about that hold-up, Grady?"

"Joe Evans told me," Grady said quickly. "It came in over the depot wire this morning."

"I see. Well, yuh'd better have Ma do a pile of cookin'. When that posse gets back, they're goin' to be plumb hungry."

Bing moved along the street to the corner. There he turned down the side street that led to the depot. He wasn't too handy yet with his peg-leg, and he didn't like to walk. Ordinarily he spent his time in his office, but he had some walking to do today, and if his hunch panned out, he was going to be mighty busy, and soon.

Grimly he hoped he had figured it out straight. If he had, he would show Ed Crawley that it took more than a peg-leg to put a good lawman on the side lines.

"If a wire came in about that Bent River hold-up, how come I didn't hear about it?" Bing demanded of Joe Evans.

"What yuh talkin' about?" Evans asked hotly. "No wire came in about no hold-up."

"Yuh didn't tell Buck Grady about a hold-

up in Bent River County?"

"I shore didn't."

Bing thought a moment, and then he asked: "Did Grady send a wire lately?"

Evans nodded. "He sent one two—three days ago. It wasn't anything important. Somethin' about fishing being good in Paulina County."

"Did he get an answer?"

"Yeah. It was from the same gent Grady had sent his wire to. Said he'd be here at one-thirty today."

"Where did it come from?"

"Some little town in northern Nevada. Rattlesnake Switch, I think it was."

"Thanks, Joe."

Bing glanced at his watch. He didn't have much time, but enough. He moved as rapidly as he could back to Main Street, and went into Grady's restaurant.

"Howdy, Sheriff," Grady said affably. "Come back to finish that steak?"

Bing came up close to the counter. He pulled his gun, and lined it on Grady's ample stomach.

"I came back to take care of some unfinished business," Bing said coldly. "Yuh're under arrest, Grady. Head for the jail, and stay ten feet ahead. A man with a peg-leg ain't much good in a fist fight. If yuh try to get at me, I'll kill yuh."

Grady's face paled. He glanced at the door, then looked at the clock on the shelf behind him.

"What yuh arrestin' me for?" he demanded. "I ain't done nothin'."

"Mebbe yuh ain't," Bing said, "but yuh're shore aimin' to. Get movin."

"Yuh can't arrest me for somethin' I ain't done," Grady insisted doggedly.

"If I'm wrong I'm in a hole," Bing admitted, "but if I ain't, yuh're in trouble. The charge is accessory before the fact happened. That sounds good, and it'll do. Get goin'."

Grady went then, across the street, and into the jail. When the cell door had clanged shut behind him, Bing asked:

"Yuh want to talk, Grady? It'll make it easier for me, and it'll shore make it easier for you when they pull this job off, and yuh come up for trial."

"I got nothin' to talk about," Grady insisted.

"Yuh got plenty to talk about. This has got all the earmarks of one of the Beauty Kid's jobs. I don't know of any other bank robber who figgers things out neat and tricky like he does. Yuh lied about Joe Evans tellin' yuh about a hold-up in Bent River County."

"All right," Grady muttered. "I lied, but I don't know nothin' about the Beauty Kid. Them two hombres told me about the hold-up before you and Dale come in. I tried to give yuh a tip, but yuh let 'em slip out from under yore fingers. Yuh'll have a hard time explainin' that, Austin."

"That's all yuh've got to say?"

"That's all, cuss yuh," Grady snarled.

BACK in his office Bing replaced his Stetson with a battered, dirty one. He took off his clothes, and slipped into a ragged shirt and a pair of dirty levis. He slit the left leg of the levis, fastened his holster inside, and replaced his gun in the holster. Then he pinned the hole shut so that it would not be noticeable to a casual observer.

The gun hung heavily, but again it was something that would not likely be seen. He took a Winchester and a sawed-off shotgun from the gun rack, and hobbled down the walk to the livery stable.

"You got a Winchester here, ain't yuh, Mike?" he asked the liveryman.

"Yeah," Zachary said curiously. "Why?"

"I'm guessin' the Beauty Kid has schemed up the neatest bank job yuh ever heard of," Bing answered, "and we ain't got much time. I want a couple of old sacks and a bottle of whisky."

Zachary stared at him a moment pop-eyed.

"The Beauty Kid!" he whispered.

He scurried to the back of the barn, and came back with the sacks, and a half-filled whisky bottle.

"I don't see what yuh're gettin' at, Bing," he said, "but yuh're an old hand at the business. I reckon yuh know what yuh're doin'."

"I think I do," Bing answered grimly, "but Ed Crawley may have some doubts."

He sprinkled the whisky liberally over his shirt front, and handed the bottle back to Zachary.

"Stay out of sight, Mike," he advised, "and keep yore Winchester handy. Don't start anything till I do."

Bing had a tough time handling the shotgun, rifle, and sacks, but he got them to the bank. He laid the Winchester on the walk in front of the bank, covered it carelessly with the sacks, and then took the shotgun inside.

Ed Crawley looked through the teller's window as Bing came up, and sniffed.

"You've been drinking, Bing!" the banker exploded. "Just because Dale's out of town you're acting like a fool."

"Shut up!" Bing snapped, and shoved the shotgun through the window. "Yuh had a

lot to say this mornin' about how useless a peg-legged sheriff was. We're goin' to find out who's right mighty soon. Keep that scatter-gun handy, and don't get excited. Yuh'll cook my game if yuh go off half-cocked."

"You're drunk, Austin," Crawley snapped. "What kind of play-acting is this?"

"It ain't play-actin', Crawley. Unless I'm wrong, the Beauty Kid's cooked up a scheme to empty the town so's he can rob the bank nice and easy. Remember what I said about goin' off half-cocked? No use of getting yoreself killed. Wait till I start things."

Bing hobbled out of the bank, leaving Crawley staring after him. It was almost one-thirty when Bing reached the sidewalk. There he waited, but not long.

A buckboard turned into Main Street two blocks north of the bank, and pulled up in front of where Bing stood. There were two men in the rig. The driver was a tall, red-headed gent dressed like a cowpuncher. The other was short and slender. He wore a gray suit and an expensive cream-colored Stetson. His features were fine, almost girlish. That would be the Beauty Kid, Bing thought.

Both men stepped down from the buckboard, and looked up and down the street. Then they came up to Bing, and paused, the slender man's china-blue eyes raking him, the coldest, hardest eyes Bing had ever seen, and he had met up with more than his share of tough hombres in the years he had sheriffed Paulina County.

"Howdy," Bing said, and hiccuped. He seemed surprised.

"The town looks deserted," the slender man said.

"Yesh," Bing said. "Plumb empty." He hiccuped again. "Sheriff showed up chashin' shome crooksh. Took everybody with him."

"Why didn't you go?"

Bing reeled uncertainly, and grabbed at the hitch-rack.

"Me?" He grinned foolishly. "I wanted to go, but they wouldn't take me. I alwaysh mish the fun."

Apparently the slender man took Bing for a drunk exactly as Bing had meant to be taken.

"Come on, Lou," the man said.

Bing didn't move until the men were inside the bank. Then he stooped, unpinned the slit in his trouser leg, and pulled his gun. Just as he started hobbling toward the bank, two riders on pinto horses came into view at the south end of Main Street. They were leading two saddled horses, and Bing saw, in the one, quick glance he gave them, that they were the men who had left Grady's restaurant so hurriedly an hour and a half ago.

Bing reached the bank door just as the slender man said:

"Yuh're looking at the Beauty Kid, hombre. Get yore safe open, quick, if yuh want to live."

Ed Crawley was staring at the two men, mouth open, fear hard in his eyes. Then he did the very thing Bing had been afraid he would do. He grabbed for the sawed-off shotgun.

THE Beauty Kid and the man beside him had guns in their hands. Crawley didn't have a chance. The Kid's gun flamed, and Crawley slumped to the floor.

Then Bing opened up. His first shot ploughed through the Kid's neck. The red-headed outlaw wheeled away from the teller's window, and pitched a shot at Bing, but he hurried it too much, and missed. Bing fired twice, and the redhead sprawled over the Beauty Kid's inert body.

Bing dropped his Colt, and clawed the sacks away from the Winchester. For an instant the outlaws had pulled up their mounts in front of the livery stable, apparently surprised at the gunfire. Then they saw Bing, and whirled their horses, but they were too late. One of them tumbled out of the saddle with Bing's first shot. Mike Zachary got the second one.

"Keep 'em covered, Mike!" Bing yelled. "I'll be there as soon as I get a look inside."

The Beauty Kid and the redhead were dead inside the bank, but Ed Crawley was not. He had been hit in the chest, and he was bleeding badly, but it looked to Bing as if the banker would make it. He plugged the wound the best he could, and hobbled down the street to where Zachary stood over the two outlaws.

"They ain't hurt much," Zachary said, and swore. "Dang it, I thought I'd got that one between the eyes, but I just parted his hair for him."

"Crawley's hurt purty bad, Mike. Do yuh know where Doc is?"

"He went out to Bob Melody's place. Ought to be back any time."

"Let's get these ornery sons into the calaboose," Bing said, "and then you go get Crawley's wife. I reckon we'd best leave him in the bank till Doc gets back. . . ."

The posse rode in a little after sundown, tired, dusty, and empty-handed.

"Where's that Sheriff Webb?" Bing demanded.

"I dunno," Dale Russek said. "We lost the trail of them outlaws out of town a piece, but Webb claimed they'd head for Juniper City so they'd be out of the state. We got to Juniper City, but nobody had seen 'em, so Webb sent us back, and said he'd pick up their trail across the line. He figgered they'd dodged around the town."

Bing laughed. "You boys had a nice ride. Dale, hike up to the depot, and have Joe Evans wire the sheriff at Juniper City to pick Webb up. He's probably gone on to Eagle Rock, but they'll get him."

"What yuh mean," Dale shouted, "to pick Webb up?"

"The real Webb's still in Bent River County, I reckon," Bing answered. "The gent you was ridin' with was a fake. He's one of the Beauty Kid's men. It was a smart trick to empty the town."

He told them what had happened.

"I suspicioned it all the time," he said then, "but I wasn't shore, so I couldn't take no chances on tellin' you boys not to ride with him. Besides, I figgered the town had to look good to the Beauty Kid when he rode in, or he wouldn't have tackled the bank. This way we got 'em all but the fake sheriff, and they'll get him all right."

"Bing!"

Bing turned to see Mose Younger who

[*Turn page*]

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had come up behind him.

"Ed wants to talk to yuh, Bing," Younger said.

"Get that wire off to Juniper City, Dale," Bing said, and followed Younger.

Ed Crawley had been taken to his house. Doc Hyman met Bing and Younger at the door.

"Ed ain't hurt as bad as we thought," the medico said. "He shouldn't talk, but he's got something on his mind, and the best thing to do is to let him get it off."

Ed Crawley's face looked thinner than ever in the lamplight, and ghastly white.

"Sit down, Bing," the banker said. "I want to know how you smelled out the Beauty Kid's trick."

Bing pulled a chair up to the bedside.

"It's like I said this mornin', Ed. An experienced lawman gets to noticin' a lot of little things that most folks overlook. Me and Dale most always eat our dinner in Grady's restaurant mighty near noon. Grady could count on that, and he'd been writin' the set-up to the Beauty Kid somewheres in Nevada where he'd been holing up. When he figgered the sign was right, he wired the Kid. I got it out of Grady after I'd worked him over some.

"I got my first hunch when Grady was blabbin' away about the hold-up. I knew doggone well I'd hear of any hold-up before Grady did. Besides, it looked a little too pat when the hombres that'd ridden in on the pinto hosses slid off their stools and high-tailed out of town just when Grady was talkin' about it.

"Grady said Sheriff Webb from Bent River would be along purty soon, and shore enough, Webb showed up. I knew Bent River had a new sheriff named Webb, but I'd never seen him. Then the fake Webb talks too much about how tough these jaspers are, and he takes everybody in town. I reckon a real lawman would've taken Dale and mebbe one or two more, but not an army like this jigger did. He made a slip, too, when he said the Beauty Kid was way over in Idaho. The last I'd heard, he'd been seen in northern Nevada.

"Well, I couldn't really say much 'cause up to there I'd just been guessin', so I let 'em go. I asked Grady how he knew about the hold-up, and he said Evans told him. That looks now like a fool thing to say, but Grady figgered I'd be so mad about not bein' able to go with the posse that I wouldn't think of askin' Evans about the wire. That's where I fooled him. Soon as Evans said he didn't get any such wire, and that Grady had wired a feller in Nevada, I was purty shore I was right. After that, it was just a proposition of gettin' ready to take care of the Kid when he showed up."

"Which you did," Doc Hyman said.

"I don't usually like to say I've been wrong about something," Crawley whispered, "but I do this time. I was plumb wrong about a peg-legged man not being able to be a good sheriff. We're hoping you'll forget all about what we said this morning."

"Yuh wasn't too wrong at that," Bing said quickly. "By the time my term's out, I reckon Dale will be ready to take over. I just don't want to be given no charity, and I wanted to quit when my term was up. I'll get a reward for the Beauty Kid and his bunch, and I'm aimin' to buy a little hoss ranch."

"We still feel Paulina County should do something for you," Crawley said.

Bing's jaw set. "By grab, Ed, I don't know how I can get it through yore head. I don't want nothin'."

"I'm thinking about Paulina County's own good," Crawley said. "Like making you a permanent deputy so we'll always have somebody around who sees the little things." He added quickly, "Without pay, of course."

Bing Austin's weathered face creased in a grin then.

"That's different, Ed. I reckon I'd like that."

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

SQUATTERS' LAW

AN EXCITING PIONEER FOLK STORY

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

AND MANY OTHER ACTION YARNS!

During the furious struggle, the head of Matt's shovel snapped off

HELL'S FREIGHTER

By FRANK MORRIS

Former Cowpuncher Matt Stilwell Proves He's a Dyed-in-the-Wool Fightin' Fool When Land Hogs Get a Mite Too Grasping!

THE low, massive old ranchhouse was dark, brooding, in its silence and its age, cool after the stifling heat under the brassy sun. But the earthly chill of the thick 'dobe walls carried a dank mustiness that brought a long-absent sense of dread creeping beneath the sweaty shirt on Matt Stilwell's shoulders. He missed Sing Lee's quiet welcome; felt the tomblike silence pressing against him, barring him with its eerie shadows.

Adam Stilwell, his father, sat in his big leather chair by the deep-recessed window overlooking the patio and its frame of the Santa Rosa's red crags and purple cañons. He looked tired, shrunken, filled with years and the memories peopling his casa.

His hair and beard were almost white, a bushy, recalcitrant fringe about the darkly weathered face. The long hawk nose dipped down over the taciturn mouth. It was a thin-lipped mouth, curved at the corners as

though weighted with the bitterness of an empty old age. He didn't get up, gave no indication that he was aware of the tall, wide-shouldered young man in faded levis and flat-heeled freighter's boots walking slowly toward him in the cedar-beamed living room.

The measured drip of a sweating olla that splashed on the red floor tiles beat into Matt Stilwell's ears and brain like the click of a penitent's beads. It seemed to shout at him, warning him.

He removed his dusty hat, placed it on the adz-squared mantel over the wide fireplace. His features were craggy, deeply chiseled, and he moved with the lithe grace and sureness of a man who knew how to handle himself, whether afoot or wheeling freight over mountain or desert. He faced his father, blue eyes wide, honest—the kind of eyes that could sparkle with good humor, or narrow into chill slits.

Old Adam turned his shaggy head slowly, as though reluctant to expend the effort. His eyes were dark coals, deep-set, smoldering behind stiff, bushy brows. They snapped at his son. Matt remembered the lobo he had cornered on Table Top. He had looked that way.

"So, the whelp comes back, to pick the bones of his old man's kill," growled Adam. Rumbling, his voice chased the silence into the shadows of dark doorways. "A cussed two-bit teamster—a no-good grubbin' laborer!" he shouted. "Yuh threw up the chance to rod the best cow ranch in Hossshoe Valley, to haul other folk's truck!"

Adam spat into the cold fireplace, wiped the strings of amber tobacco juice from his wiry beard.

"I told yuh ten years back I never wanted to see the likes of yuh again," the oldster rasped, "unless yuh was ready to settle down here on the Walkin' R and go to work. I'm tellin' yuh again!"

MATT saw his father tremble with the anger whipping through his lean old frame. He saw the cane by the chair and the stiff leg thrust out straight. It looked the way a gnarled scrub-oak looks, dead and old and good only for earth, for humus. Matt's eyes narrowed. It would be just like Reb Culver, he reflected, to move in, a yellow coyote, brave when the choused-out herd bull was too old and sick to fight.

"Yuh're not goin' to get the Walkin' R!" shouted the rancher. "You nor that skunk of a Culver, savvy?"

The cane fell with a clatter. Old Adam gripped the arms of his chair, his rope-twisted hands bony mauls.

Many times on the trail home, ever since the day a drifting cowhand had told Matt what was going on, and he had turned his general freighting business over to his foreman, he had worked over in his mind what he would say to his father. He would try to explain away the harsh idealism that had been his as a kid of eighteen, ten years ago. He would tell him the hate he held for the struggle a cowman had to put up to keep his name out of the gone-to-Texas book.

Apaches—they had been bad enough. And then it had been the rustlers and the ambitious small ranchers with running irons always hot and ready to doctor a brand. All that just to make a living. Adam had survived, bitter, ruthless, a tyrant in his climb to cattle king, stepping on any who got in his way.

He hadn't been crooked, an out-and-out cattle thief but, like the other big cattlemen, his riders had always carried mighty careless ropes on their hulls, and six-shooters that rested easily in oiled leather holsters. At twenty-eight, with a business of his own, standing on his own feet, Matt Stilwell could understand his father a bit better, could give him credit for the sweat and courage and brains it took to earn a place in the sun.

A man didn't have to shove others around, though. Facing the old cowman, crippled up, self-willed as an old she bear with cubs, Matt felt his arguments and explanations dying. Once again, as in his youth, he knew the strong will of his father, felt it beat down his ten-year shell of self-confidence, steal with fear's cold fingers to his back and ripple there, to lay, palm-down, on his wide shoulders like wet soogans on bed-out after a flash flood.

"I heard the Walkin' R was in trouble," Matt said. "That's why I come back. But I don't want no part of yore man-killin' cow ranch. I heard that Reb Culver filed homestead papers on Sucio Creek. That cuts off yore water. I thought mebbe I could do somethin' about that. Didn't know yuh was laid up with a bad leg, or I'd've come sooner." Matt felt like a fool button.

Adam got to his feet. Lame. He stumbled over his cane on the floor, kicked at it with his good foot. It broke against the smoky lava rocks of the fireplace.

"Drygulcher—shot off my knee-cap six months back," he growled. "Culver's man, I reckon. And Culver's got Sucio cut off,

shore enough. He's makin' me pay to water my critters! I didn't know till he filed on the creek that there was any Gover'ment land on the Walkin' R. But it was there, and that skunk's got it. He's farmin' down on the lower bench. Got four or five hoemen workin' for him, raisin' spuds and such stuff and sellin' 'em in town.

"And that ain't all. He got hisself appointed postmaster of Diablito—and spends his nights stealin' mine and some of the other fellers' stock. But what in blazes am I tellin' you my troubles for?"

Old Adam's eyes traveled over his son's husky body, came to a rest on Matt's hips.

"You too strait-laced to wear a iron, or just chicken, like yuh was as a kid? Yuh got nerve, offerin' me help. Get out!" The cowman roared now. "Get out, and don't show in Diablito! I shore don't want any of the old-timers to see what's carryin' my brand!"

Matt knew an empty feeling in the pit of his flat stomach. It just didn't seem to be in the cards for his father to do anything but bluster and hate. Anger came slowly to Matt, yet it came and it was hot. His face took on a grim, blocky determination, was finally a replica of the old fire-eater in front of him.

"All right," he said thinly. "I'll get out. I won't be comin' back, not until I've got Culver's hide. But I'm comin' back then, and when I do, yuh old shell-back, yuh're goin' to greet me with a smile. For the first time in yore ringy life, yuh're goin' to say thanks for favors done!"

Matt spun on his boots, stamped out of the house, to swing up on his big deep-chested roan at the front gate. Old Adam limped after his son, watched hot-eyed as Matt pulled a six-gun from his rolled slicker from behind the cantle and thrust it into the waistband of his levis. He didn't look back, touched his spurs into the gelding's ribs, and rolled a cloud of dust toward Diablito on the desert edge of Horseshoe Valley. The trace of a smile tugged at Adam's stern mouth.

"Misjudged that boy, shore as the devil," he muttered into his beard. "And him buckin' Diablito alone!"

Adam made his way back into the house, his big bony hands gripping the door frame, easing himself inside. There was no peace in his heart, and the gaze he laid on the small faded tintype of his wife in the bookcase was a somber, brooding thing. His long fingers laced through his beard, pulled at the wiry whiskers. A cow-country oath rumbled deep in his chest, boomed from his lips to crash harshly in the silence. . . .

DIABLITO was sprawled out on the edge of the valley, a handful of shacks and false-fronted buildings set down hit-or-miss along the sides of the dusty wide streets. It hadn't changed much that Matt could see. There were a few more saloons, maybe, and Boothill had spread out some. The jagged rim of Los Coyotes reared up at its back, threw long shadows in crazy-quilt pattern down into the outskirts.

Matt rode slowly down the wide main street, the lowering sun flashing red and blue on his speckled roan. His eyes stalked the shops along the walks. Some of the names on the peeling signs won a grim smile of reminiscence from his taut lips. These folks would have cause to remember him, a Stilwell. Matt's mouth twisted. He wondered—and grinned at his own naive thought—if the name still engendered the hate it once had.

He pulled up in front of Diablito's post-office, tied his roan and stepped up on the walk. Leaning lazily against the post-office front wall, he pulled out the makings and fashioned a cigarette—and a crook-billed thing it was, spilling its brown flakes as he struck fire to the crimped end.

His blue eyes were narrow cracks swiveling up and down the street. Three doors down, tinny music blared forth from Ike Allen's saloon. Three punchers, faces red with tanglefoot, scuffed in horseplay under the wooden awning. A frown cut into Matt's tanned forehead. Punchers they might be, but they had the stamp of gunmen about them, wore twin irons low on their hips, and had the eyes that go with that sort of thing.

One of them, a tall man, lean as rawhide, was doing most of the loud talking, waving his long arms to accompany a drawling harangue. Matt caught the brand name of his father's lay-out and tensed, suddenly alert. He didn't like the cut of the fellow's mouth, nor the little green eyes that flashed his way a time or two.

The gunman must have felt Matt's stare, for he turned around to glare brazenly, arrogance and belligerence in his pale eyes. It wouldn't be hard to pick up a fight in this town!

Matt took a deep drag on his smoke and snapped it out into the street, moseyed into the post-office. The clerk behind the

stamp window was stacking a little roll of quarters. He slipped them into a piece of brown paper and rolled them tight, scribbled his count and put them away before he looked up.

He wore a pair of grimy sleeve-guards and a green eye-shade pulled low over his bulging white forehead. A cigarette dangled from his colorless lips, and when he spoke, it jerked up perilously close to the celluloid shade.

His "what can I do for you?" was completely automatic and impersonal.

Matt stared, silent, moody. Maybe he was just a fool, to ride into this lone-handed. He thought of his freight wagons, his crew and his string of deep-chested, big-barreled Percherons; his bunch of wiry little sure-footed mules down at Tucson. The respect and admiration of honest men and a going business could fade ten towns like Diablito.

Trouble seemed to ride these little cow-towns with a spade bit, and here he was walking right into it with a loaded six-gun in his belt. He, who could hit a jack rabbit at fifty feet—if the rabbit held still and the wind was right—was going in to beard a gunny like Reb Culver.

The foot of the one jack that had held still was in his hip pocket. Matt pulled it out and rubbed it, eased it inside his sack of Bull in his shirt pocket, over his heart. His lips were a tight, white band over his teeth. He pulled off his leather driving gloves and wiped the cold sweat from his palms against the legs of his pants.

The clerk pushed back his eye-shade, his watery eyes darting to Matt's outthrust chin, the cold eyes, and the butt of the .45 heeling up from the freighter's levis.

"I'm from the Walkin' R," Matt said. "I want to see the postmaster, Reb Culver."

The clerk's eyes flicked over Matt's shoulder to the tall, green-eyed gunny strolling in the front door. There was a warning in that glance and Matt spun around, saw the slash-mouthed gun-dog lounge through the outer office with jingle-bobs tinkling, lean lazily against the partition with its rows of rent boxes and mail slots.

Rawhide muscles moved over the bone-lean angularity of the gunman with catlike smoothness. He yawned and pulled a lint-fuzzed leaf of burley from a pocket, tongued it into his wide mouth. It made a lump as big as an egg under his leathery cheek. His fingers were long, black-nailed talons hovering close to the walnut butts of the big Colts swinging in their tied-down holsters.

"Stilwells ain't got no business with Reb Culver, pilgrim," Green-eyes drawled in a nasal twang. "Reb's busy. Besides, nobody from the Walkin' R is to home in Diablito."

"Reb's not too busy to see me," Matt said, his voice thin-edged and brittle.

The heavy lids over the gunman's eyes crawled down. "Reb'll decide that," he put out flatly.

MATT remembered Reb Culver, his quick, white gambler's hands and his gunman pose to cover a tinhorn rep. He remembered also Reb's .41 hide-out that wasn't a hide-out because the bluster and inflated ego of the man had always made a point of showing it.

Reb Culver, postmaster! Matt snorted in disgust, and wondered at the size of the pay-off Reb had given for the appointment.

He moved over to the chest-high writing desk and slid a pad of blank money order forms toward him. After he got the gummy pen to working, he scribbled something on the blank and handed it to the white-faced clerk.

"Yore high leader will want to read that," he said, and added tersely, "I'll wait for his answer."

The clerk's eyes goggled. He whirled away from his cage, vanished from sight. The gunman moved over and leaned against Reb's office door.

"Listen, stranger, yuh askin' for trouble, or yuh just plumb fool? There ain't nobody goin' in there and brace Reb. I say so! You mosey, before I get my mad up."

Reb paid well for his gunmen. This one was all lobo, and as quick. But a freighter had to be quick, too, and sure of movement. Matt's right hand dropped toward his six-gun and, as the gunny's talons stabbed down, came up and out, straight, hard—flush to Green-eyes' bony jaw. Rocky muscles that could tool a load of heavy freight over the roughest mountain road, were behind that blow. And the snap at the end of it was delivered with the certain control of a whip artist.

The gun guard sagged, his half-drawn six-shooters sliding back into leather. The green eyes rolled grotesquely, showing the muddy whites. The gunman unraveled and fell, out on his boots. The clerk, crouching behind the safe, gave a terrified squeak. Matt opened Reb's door and stepped inside the cubby-hole.

Culver's office was small, seemed hardly large enough to contain his sleek bulk. One

dirty-paned window and a door opened onto the back alley. An old spur-scarred, roll-top desk squatted in one corner. Reb sat in front of it, sorting out a pile of green-backs. His eyes were warm and brown and rested lightly on Stilwell. He smiled, showing his white teeth. It was a cold smile. Matt thought of a bobcat with kittens he had cornered one time in Tanque Verdes.

"I heard the fuss out there, Stilwell," Reb said quietly. "If yuh don't know it, this is a Gover'ment office. Yuh can't come in here and cause trouble. Yuh should have waited till I was free."

"Free to steal the balance of the Walkin' R herd!" Matt said. "I'm here to buy yore place over on Sucio Creek like that note said that I sent in here with yore little fieldmouse clerk with the green blinkers. Yuh're ruinin' my old man's range and it's got to stop!"

Culver smoothed the long, silky mustache on his short lip.

"That's pretty big talk for a Stilwell, ain't it? The land on the creek is mine—proved up, and I've got the patent. If old Adam wants any of my water, he'll pay. As for the rustlin', yuh'll have to prove that—to my sheriff!"

"Yuh're a slippery snake, Culver."

The postmaster got to his feet. There was a scrape of boots in the outer office, then half a dozen hard-case gunnies crowded into Reb's cubby. The one Matt had downed with a slug to the jaw stood at his elbow, shoving hot hate at the freighter. Matt felt the harsh dig of a gun in his back, slowly raised his hands. The man holding the six wore a star on his vest.

"Close that door," ordered the boss of Diablito. "This nosy son is a Stilwell. Yuh all know what that means. . . You, Gila," he said to the gunman with the green eyes, "get rid of him—for keeps. I've got the old man over a barrel, and I don't want anything to spoil that. The boys up in the Santa Rosas have just about got the Walkin' R herd cleaned out, all but a few stockers. Tonight we'll finish up old Stilwell and take over.

"Jim and Pode will stay with the place on Sucio—that little farmin' try pays. The rest of you boys will rod the Walkin' R. We'll make a buzzard roost out of that lay-out—throw a few tight loops over the little ranchers in the Rosas. I'm workin' on a deal to run a spur here to Diablito. That'll make it mighty easy for us to fat up the stock we're runnin' over the Mex line and ship out from here. Like I done told yuh-all, if yuh stick with me, we'll all be on Easy Street in no time."

Culver liked to brag, Matt thought, and a grim smile twitched at his lips. The gunmen grunted, filed out of Reb's office, leaving the freighter facing Culver. "Gila" prodded Matt's ribs with his drawn six-gun, jerked the gun from his belt and tossed it on Culver's desk.

"This jasper won't bother yuh no more, Rem," Gila snarled. "Not after I get done with him."

Matt's jaw was rocky with defiance, but under the threat of Gila's gun there was nothing he could do at the moment. He preceded the gunman from the office, out into Diablito's darkening street. He felt embarrassment—defeat prodding him down the boardwalk.

OLD Charlie Wilson, standing in the doorway of his saddle shop, recognized Matt, stared wonderingly into his face. His bearded jaws opened, but whatever he wanted to say caught in his accordion-pleated neck as Gila scowled at him, sent him scuttling back into the shop.

Lamps winked on as Matt and Gila walked down the length of the wide street. Matt lowered his head and hoped the townsmen he knew weren't watching. It would kill his father, break the old man's pride to know a Stilwell had been marched through the town at the point of a gun; pushed along as though he were an outlaw or a tramp, being escorted out of Diablito.

Gila called a halt at Humbolt's hardware store, jabbed Matt inside and shouted into the dim interior. Bert Humbolt waddled toward them, fat and perspiring. He smelled strongly of paint and stale sweat. The plump hand wiping the damp bandana over the shiny expanse of his bald head was stained with axle grease, and left a brown smear on his whiter skin.

"Matt Stilwell!" He beamed at the freighter, peering through the dim light. "By golly, boy—thought shore that old bear of a pa of yores had chased yuh out of this neck of the woods for good. I hear tell he's bein' rustled out of business. Is that—" Humbolt broke off, his little marble-eyes goggling at Gila. "Matt, you trailin' with fellers such as—" He saw the gun in Gila's hand.

"Shut that 'baccy trap, Humbolt," Gila snapped savagely. "I want a shovel. Round point, with a long handle. And trot it out in a hurry!"

Swift understanding flooded young Stilwell. As the sudden shock of Gila's plan burst over him, he took a step away from the green-eyed gunman.

Gila moved fast. He lifted his six-gun, to swipe the long barrel in a chopping slash at Matt's head. Matt jerked, and the front sight sliced into his cheek.

"Stand hitched, savvy?" grated the gunman. "Yuh done lost any chance yuh had back there in the post-office when yuh slugged me. I'm dealin' now."

Matt wiped at the blood springing to his face and trickling down his blocky jaw.

"You son!" he said huskily. "Throw down that iron, an' I'll whip yore insides out."

Gila cuffed him, slapped him in the mouth with a bony hand.

"Another try like that, an' I'll skin yuh alive," he snarled.

Humbolt wheezed back from the tool rack, held out a new ash-handled shovel.

"That's costin' yuh a sawbuck," he said.

"It ain't costin' me nothin'," Gila snapped.

"Then it comes out of Reb Culver's poke! That tinhorn don't own this town, nor me neither."

"Yeah?" Gila growled. "Here's yore pay, fat stuff!"

His .45 arced over Humbolt's bald head, connected with a pulpy squash. The storekeeper raised on his feet, quivered, his eyes rolling, then wilted down over his big belly and stretched out on the floor.

Horror blazed in Matt's eyes. Even down in the Tucson area he had heard of Gila—the "Gila Kid" some called him—a rustler, highwayman and all around gunman with a pair of fast Colts for hire to the highest bidder. He was as dangerous as a copperhead. There wouldn't be an out here. This was the end of the trail. Matt ground his teeth helplessly, stumbled out of the store at the prodding end of Gila's threatening .45.

Gila jerked his head toward the end of the street.

"Thataway, Stilwell, and keep a-goin' till I tell yuh to stop."

Matt's blood ran icy in his veins. A fine sweat broke out on his upper lip. His eyes swiveled up and down the silent, empty street. There wasn't a soul in sight, but he knew there was more than one pair of eyes on him. He could feel them peeking from the safety of closed windows and locked doors. A boogered town! Why should they endanger their lives to take up the fight—for a Stilwell!

And the law. It didn't mean a thing, not with the sheriff a paid gunny in Culver's gang of killers. "Thataway," Gila had said—to the end of the street and the purpling desert beyond.

"Come on!" Gila growled impatiently. "Rattle them hocks, freight man. Spooked, ain't you?" he taunted. "Well, that'll pass, soon's yuh dig a nice deep grave for yoreself and digest a bellyful of lead I got for yuh here in this equalizer. Where yuh're goin', ten span of them blue-nose mules of yores wouldn't pull yuh out!"

They reached the end of the street, passed the last shack and kicked through the scattered bottles and cans and trash, the dirty skirts of Diablito. Matt halted on the edge of the bench that fell away abruptly to the floor of the desert. There was a dry wash down there at the bottom of the twenty-foot bank, lined with brush and willow and a few cacti.

One of the cacti grew at his feet, and in the fast fading twilight he could see where the broad green bands had been slashed by some little kid with a new knife and the itch to use it. It hadn't been many years since he himself had done just that trick.

FOR a moment he could see the ghost of the boy he had been, serious-faced, dominated by stern old Adam; motherless, raised by faithful old Sing Lee. And now he was going down there in that wash, filled with the odds and ends of things, the castoffs of a rough new town squatting in desert sufferance. And he wouldn't be coming back.

He slid and stumbled down into the wash, with Gila close behind him. The gunman called a halt in the sandy bed, screened by the brush from the town's fearful watchers.

"Start diggin', wagon-man," Gila said, and tossed the shovel to Matt. "And make her deep. We don't want no flash flood to sluice yuh out."

He moved off ten paces and hunkered down in the brush, his eyes like those of a snake, watching Matt's every move.

Matt knew fear then, cold, shuddering fear that dried the sweat on his long back and slowed the action of his heart. He dug slowly, his mind racing. Gila wasn't fooling—he had known that from the start. He would do just what he said he would, and if anyone in town had any idea of interfering it would be too bad for them.

But there had to be some way out of this; some way to make a stand for himself. He rebelled at the thought of being shot

down, an unprotesting, frightened clod without the nerve to put up a fight.

As he worked, a plan began to glimmer dimly in his brain. Digging a grave. In sand. An arroyo which, in flood times, was a roaring torrent. The plan was an incomplete thing, dangerous, half-formed. But anything would be worth a try. Gila would kill him anyway. No chance, no matter how slim, could be discarded.

His muscles tensed, trembling cords over his arms and shoulders.

He continued to dig, and the plan took more definite shape. He felt a cold calmness settle over him. The mere thought of the slimmest possibility of outwitting this killer lent a steadiness to his hands, put a cold gleam in his eye.

Gila watched carefully for a time, spat out his chew and drew out the makings to roll a smoke. Matt's shovel grated against a rounded stone, sliced down through a rotten piece of driftwood like a knife through butter, its sharp edge cutting into the damp sand two feet below the dry surface. He stepped down into the hole, squared it and evened the sides.

He paused after ten minutes of work, searched his pockets for his handkerchief, found it, brought it out to wipe his streaming face. He turned slightly away from Gila and shook out the handkerchief. He could feel the gunman's eyes boring into him, and he hoped the green eyes hadn't seen the silver dollar pocket-piece he let slip to the sand at his feet.

Gila blew out a mouthful of smoke, let it curl about his twisted lips.

Matt went back to his task, carefully working the piece of driftwood he had hoarded up over his boots so that there was a clear space of some two inches between the wood and the bottom of the grave. He brought his shovel down hard on the wood, smiled grimly at the hollow sound he produced, as though his shovel had bitten into a buried box.

"Gila!" he called out, and hoped his voice was convincing. "Look here! Silver—money, by grab! I've broken into somebody's hide-out, shore as shootin'!"

Gila jerked to his feet, approached slowly, wary as a wolf.

"If yuh're tryin' to put over somethin', feller, I'll slit yore yeller gizzard."

But the gunman took the bait, looked down into the hole. Matt's heart pumped like a piston beneath his shirt as he stooped and retrieved his silver dollar and tossed it to Gila.

The green eyes peered at the dollar. Suspicion filled his glance.

"Say, what yuh tryin' to palm off?" he snarled. "This here silver is plumb smooth, like it come out of yore pocket."

"Look here," Matt said. "See this piece of rotten board? Part of an old box, looks like. Mebbe some miner's cabin-bank, washed down last spring in the rains. The sand would smooth her off some."

Gila's green eyes widened.

"Say, yuh suppose . . . Gimme that shovel an' we'll see what yuh found!"

He still held the gun in his right hand, reached out with his left for the shovel. Matt held it to him, point first. As the gunman's fingers touched it, he parried and brought it smashing down on Gila's gun-hand.

The gunny leaped back, dropping the six-gun and howling with pain. The sharp edge of the shovel had sliced into his flesh. Matt whirled the long handle about his head, slashed at Gila. But the gunman saw the move and leaped aside. Before Matt could recover his swing, Green-eyes had scooped up his gun with his left hand, thumbed back the hammer.

The six-gun roared, flashed in Matt's face, and he felt the fan of death as the lead whined by his ear and slapped into the sand up the wash.

MATT was out of the grave in one pantherish leap, his shovel swinging. The strength that could snap a sixteen-foot bull whip and make it sound like a pistol shot was behind that swing. The blade of the shovel hit Gila flat side to, thudded against the man's lean ribs. The head of the shovel snapped off, sliced out into the gathering dark.

Gila staggered, all the wind knocked out of him. His face purpled as he tried to drag air into his tortured lungs. He gasped with pain as fractured ribs knifed into tender flesh. But he kept his feet, six-gun still in hand.

Matt stared, stunned for the moment, at the broken handle in his fists. The end was splintered, a long jagged, sharp point where the neck of the shovel had fitted over the white ash. Matt grunted out an oath. The last vestige of fear left him in the tide of red anger and hate surging through his rawhide frame.

Suddenly the shovel handle was no longer a stout piece of wood, but the war lance of

a fighting Stilwell. Some ancient Saxon ancestor knew life again at that moment. Head up, Matt drove straight for Gila, the sharp point held level before him.

Gila shouted as the slivered end bit into his hide. He screamed, cursed, and screamed again as Matt pierced his middle and drove the shaft through him, spitting him like a barbecued beef on shipping day. Matt yanked the shaft free, lifted it high over his head and brought it down on Gila's sloping brows. It made a swishing sound as it cut through the air, thudded hollowly as it cracked down on the gunman's skull.

Wires snapped between brain and muscle. With the last instinct of living, Gila's finger jerked the trigger of the six-gun. A blow like the kick of a bronc wheeler slammed into Matt, sent him staggering back on his heels. He swayed there in the sudden silence, felt warm blood leap from his shoulder and trickle down his left arm. There was a buzzing in his ears that grew loud and roared. The sand leaped at him, was warm to his skin. It was restful there where he lay, quiet—dark.

Dark! Cold horror gripped Matt Stilwell. He had fallen into the open grave! Gila's promise!

The primal instinct for survival tore into Matt's brain, raced with its message through his tough body. Wound forgotten, he clambered out of that half-dug grave. A spooked critter with the fireballs rolling the tips of his horns couldn't have moved faster.

Matt Stilwell staggered through the wash and up to Diablito's street. His left arm was numb and bleeding where Gila's lead had sounded him. The pain was a pounding sledge. But he had retrieved Gila's six-gun and had it now, gripped in his right hand, swinging by his side.

A little kid, standing open-mouthed and staring in front of his shack of a home, watched Matt in frozen interest, turned and ran ahead of him on the walk. He stopped stock-still, devilment in his bright little eyes.

"Looky-looky-looky!" he chanted. "See the man rollin' up the street, drinkin' up his family's meat. Ya-ya-ya!"

There was the delicious terror of the moment in the kid's eyes and face. He held his ground, trembling, a race-horse at the line. He waited until Matt was five feet from him, his dirty face suddenly white as he saw the blood on Stilwell's arm and shoulder. He didn't wait after that, but leaped the paling fence, caught his made-over pants and ripped free to run like a shot-at coyote.

Matt grinned in spite of the pain, and went on. A rattle of shots down the street rang out in the stillness. Three riders swirled out into the fading light and vanished in a cloud of dust. A man started out of Humbolt's hardware store. He turned a frightened face toward Matt and scooted back inside.

Time was an illusive cloud, the dream-stuff of a mind filled with pain, confusion. Matt hung to the upright of the wooden awning in front of the post-office. Diablito was silent, holding its breath. Twilight was gone and night hovered over the town like a broody hen. He stumbled over the body of a man in the office doorway. It was a lean oldster with a brush of gray hair, almost white.

Adam Stilwell groaned, pulled himself to his hands and knees. He weaved there, cursing, mouthing oaths.

"Dad!" Matt gasped. "What—"

The old rancher managed a smile. There was blood on his shirt front, wet and red, seeping from his leathery old hide.

"Matt, boy," he said huskily, "I couldn't send yuh off like I did—mebbe to yore death. I—I follered yuh. Me and three of the Walkin' R boys. We shot up Culver's gang, sent 'em battin' out the heel flies, but . . . Don't go in there! Don't go in the post-office. Culver—he's holed up in there. He'll kill yuh shore."

Adam fell, trembled there on the boardwalk.

Matt rolled his father on his back. He couldn't wait to do more, but reeled into the post-office. He recognized the old cowhand crumpled on the floor as one of the men who had worked for the Walking R before he left to become a freighter. The man looked to be dead, for he lay still and quiet.

Matt pulled Gila's gun level, thumbed back the hammer and kicked open the door leading to Reb Culver's little office.

CULVER crouched in front of his desk. There was blood on his shirt, smearing the whole front of the white linen. A pile of greenbacks was heaped up about a satchel there by the hand with which he was steadying himself against the desk. Surprise died slowly in his brown eyes and sudden hot hate blazed there.

Matt saw the gunny, the one who had worn the sheriff's star when earlier he had faced the boss of Diablito town, stretched out on the floor.

"Come and get it, Stilwell!" Reb snarled. "I've downed yore old man, and I'm still

able to work this little forty-one."

Matt saw the hide-out gun gripped in Culver's white hand, saw the long finger tighten on the trigger.

"Yuh're cornered, Reb," he said slowly. "Throw down that cutter, and I'll see yuh get a trial. Thumb it, and I'll blow out yore crooked heart."

Dangerous light flared in Reb Culver's eyes. They darted past Matt to old Adam in the doorway, came back—fast, sure deadly. Matt was no match for a gunman, but he could shoot, pull a trigger. He saw Culver's eyes flicker, drop. The gun in the postmaster's hand was a black snout, ready to shout out its death song.

It flamed! Stinging powder peppered Matt's face. Lead seared into him with a sickening slap, and he fell back through the door and into the outer office. He sagged against the writing desk.

The big Colt in his hand was as heavy as a sack of oats and his fingers were numb, but they worked. They squeezed, slowly, sure. He couldn't miss at ten feet. Culver fired again, kicked splinters from the floor.

Matt's big six roared, slammed echoes into the post-office. Culver didn't shoot again. He raised up on his toes, a small black hole, dripping red, appeared in his forehead between the brown eyes. He fell slowly, wound down to the floor, half turning with a puzzled expression on his smooth face. His .41 dipped and fell from his dead hand, clattered on the floor, a wisp of smoke curling from the short barrel.

All the lean strength of Matt's body seemed to flow from him. He saw his knees buckle without control.

He knew he was on the floor, rolled over to watch his father, gun in hand, crawling toward him.

"Matt Stilwell," wheezed Adam. "Boy, yuh're a fightin' fool—a Stilwell. I take back what I said about yore job. Reckon you can wheel more'n five-span teams of mules for my money, any time."

Humbolt stepped cautiously into the post-office, his eyes round marbles beneath the bandage swathing his head.

"Jumpin' hop-toads!" he gulped, then whirled, ran for the doc, ponderously, feet slapping on the boardwalk.

Matt grinned at his father.

"Reckon the Walkin' R could range a few head of them Missouri canaries of mine?" he asked.

"Might," Adam said. "Pervidin' yuh could use a stiff-legged old moon-blind jackass like me for one of yore teamsters."

"Hold It, Standish! I'll Fire If You Move—"

STEVE REESE suddenly spotted his quarry—the gambler Standish, known as the Gentleman, the man who was responsible for the terror that stalked the Brazos. Steve wanted to take the Gentleman alive—a dead man can't talk.

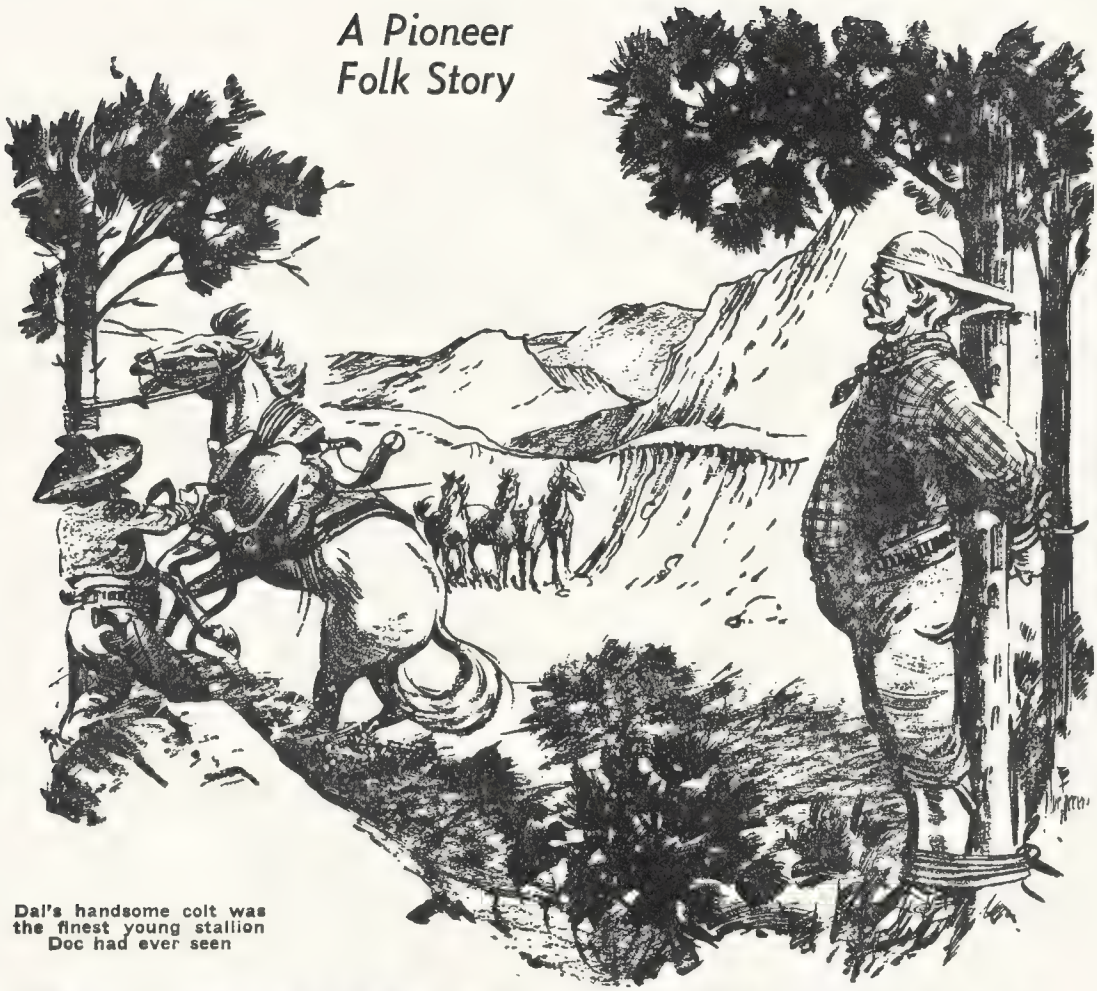
The Gentleman whipped himself around, throwing himself low as he sought escape. He'd been standing in Tin Can Alley, talking to an elderly man, when Steve had gotten the drop on him.

Suddenly the narrow passage was blocked as the man with Standish, whom Reese didn't know, intervened and bumped clumsily against Reese. It was enough to give Standish a chance to make the turn and get out of sight. Reese's bullet, aimed at Standish's moving legs, missed as it plunged into the board sidewalk. Standish's bullet whistled over Reese's head.

That ended the incident—but it gave Steve an angle to work on, made him curious about the elderly man who had spoiled the capture. And he was to meet Standish and the elderly man again—under circumstances that pack a wallop in GUNS ALONG THE BRAZOS, the exciting complete novel by Tom Curry featured next issue.

It's a novel of Steve Reese, Hank Ball and Dusty Trail at their fighting best—and it will bring you thrills and surprises from start to finish. Look forward to a grand yarn!

A Pioneer Folk Story



Dal's handsome colt was the finest young stallion Doc had ever seen

WILDERNESS JUSTICE

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

A feared rustler returns to Sun-Bear Valley and threatens the happiness of Dal and Mary Baldwin in their new home!

DAL BALDWIN proudly strode on through the new clearing to eastward of his home acreage. Thirty acres lay brushed out ready for burning. Sun-Bear Valley was opening up. The rugged wilderness was beginning to show signs of partial taming—taming by Dal Baldwin, his lovely young wife, Mary, and their two neighbor families, to westward and to the south, respectively.

Dal and his wife had made a long trek down from Montana to this wild Wyoming valley, with hope and determination to carve a home for their future and the future of their children. There were two children.

Young James Dallas, "Jimmy", a husky four-year-old who was born in the valley, now trotted along at his father's heels. In Dal's arms, blinking up at the downy fleece clouds scudding across the blue sky main, lay the baby, Tenby Morris—"Tenby" after Mary's father; "Morris", after "Doc" Carson, the Baldwins' first neighbor to arrive at Sun-Bear.

Dal was showing the youngsters the first fruits of his and their mother's hard work,

and of their good neighbors' labors.

"Not that you little uns'll savvy right now," he went on. "All that concerns yuh both is clean britches and lots of grub. But one day yuh'll take holt yore own selfs. There'll be rich pasture land of timothy and alfalfa. Yore mother and I'll watch yuh fork and tame a string of blooded hoss stock —spankin' young fillies an' colts for which the moneyed hoss folk in the East'll pay well."

Mary smiled softly and dabbed at her lovely moist eyes. One day, the children would understand the price of development of Sun-Bear Valley—not only in calloused hands, and tired, worn bodies, but in heartbreaks, anxiety and grief. For the wilderness, beautiful as it was, threw many a stern challenge at these settlers.

"Like it, honey?" Dal asked.

"It's wonderful, Dal darling. You've worked miracles, but there's something lacking still. Neighbors, Dal—more neighbors, men, women and children. I just long each day to hear the welcome rattle of wagon wheels and the jangle of harness. But we want more folk here like Doc and Marta Carson, and Ella and Tom Bruce and their little Donna."

"Right, honey," Dal told her. "We menfolk often talk it over, and each time one of us goes out to the settlement for supplies, we advertise the valley. But we got to be careful about that. We've got to have clean-minded, hard-workin' folk in here, folk that'll raise kids to grow up with our'n, folk that understand the laws of God and man."

THEY reached the fringe of the berry patch where they would pick wild fruit for an hour or so, while the boys slept. The good Marta Carson had injured an ankle, and Mary Baldwin was determined to do Marta's share of picking and packing this fall. The people of Sun-Bear Valley shared and shared alike. None went short—joys, sorrows, work and pleasure were all shared. Upon such spirit depended the success of any homestead district. Upon such spirit depended the future of a nation.

In the shade of the underbrush birds called and sang, squirrels chirped and chipmunks scurried back and forth in all their impudence.

Now and then, from high overhead, came the wild scream of Yeepek, the great bald eagle chieftain, warning the wilderness creatures that he was lord of the altitudes.

Snugly close to his brother, young Jimmy slept soundly, albeit he twitched and kicked in his sleep—a state which never completely released him from the adventures of the day in his boisterous young life here in the wilds. As the Baldwins picked, they talked and planned.

The sudden blast of two shots in quick succession startled Dal. It was the code signal of distress. With a word to Mary, Dal strode to his Winchester and fired two shots in answer. Quickly they gathered up the children and their equipment and moved back as hurriedly as possible. Either Doc Carson or Tom Bruce had fired those shots. There was trouble in Sun-Bear Valley!

Dal found plenty of trouble awaiting him. Ella Bruce was in the Baldwin yard in a state of great excitement. Little Doc Carson was missing and Tom Bruce had set out on his trail. But that was not all the bad news. Baldwin's horse pasture fence had been taken down, and his valuable horse stock rustled.

Dal quivered in every nerve fibre as he listened to Ella's story. She had hurriedly put up a lunch for Tom.

Mary led her to the cabin. Dal must have a quick snack before he left.

Dal looked off toward the north country. His one big hope for the future of his family at Sun-Bear Valley was related closely with the future of his horse raising. He had started with Naieta, a blooded filly, now a six-year-old matron and mother of three youngsters showing excellent promise.

They were the get of King, the handsome wild savage stallion leader of the far hills. One young colt, a two-year-old, was the pride of Dal's eye. He intended to breed an old mare of Doc Carson's to the colt—a mare with quite a strain of Percheron blood.

Dal was building to a fast, strong strain of saddlers which would command a handsome price. One day soon he had hoped to bring in some blooded Kentucky stock, financed from revenue from his trapping.

But now his entire spread was gone! Doc Carson, his close friend, was missing, and Doc was in no condition, arthritic cripple that he was, to travel far afoot in the rugged levels to the north and northwest. Dal was sure that Doc had immediately gone out on the widelooper's trail. . . .

Dal's conjecture was right. Though there was no way for him to know that, Doc had come over alone to the Baldwin homestead, with a report on Marta's condition An old wrangler, a great lover of horses, he had limped along to the north pasture. He was shocked on arrival to see the switching tail of a horse ridden by someone just leaving the area. The pasture was empty—the fence down.

"Malotte!"

Doc had been sure this was the work of Quirt Malotte, a half-breed with whom Dal had had a heap of trouble. Malotte had chosen this moment to start meting out vengeance for the beating Dal had been forced to give him.

Dal joined the womenfolk and hurriedly ate the snack Mary had prepared.

Ella Bruce suggested that she had better hitch up the oxen, and go bring Marta Carson to the Baldwin home.

"That sound like sense to you, Dal?" she asked.

Dal nodded.

"Right, Ella. All gather here and stay till we menfolk get back. Doc's liable to twist hisself all out of joint in them canyons, or he's liable to get to fannin' that old forty-four if—"

"Dal!" exclaimed Mary. "You think—you think there's a man back of this? That the stock were rustled? By Quirt Malotte?"

"That stock of Naieta's, even if it was so minded, couldn't have kicked down a snake fence Tom and Doc and I built, honey," Dal told his wife. "That broken fence is man doin's. Malotte, I'm shore. If it is, and Doc gets to throwin' lead, even to scare the breed, there's no tellin' just what that critter might do. But don't mention none of this to Marta. Now I'm headin' out. Watch out for yoreselves and don't worry too much about us."

DAL kissed his wife and children and patted Ella's shoulder. He strode swiftly away, but soon he turned and waved at the watching women.

Then he was gone, and Mary sighed. Should Malotte be successful in getting clear away with the stock, all Dal's work would have been in vain, and he would be forced to make a new start—from less than scratch. And then there was the thought of danger to the menfolk, especially to Doc Carson, crippled as he was.

"Had I better come over and help you hitch the bulls?" Mary asked Ella.

But Ella shook her head. "I can manage, Mary honey. Tom rigged a rack to hold the yoke. All I got to do is drive the bulls under it and pull out a couple of wooden pins and fix the bows. They're pretty quiet exceptin' when yore cow is bellerin', then Blue gets so's he has to be watched." Blue was the bull of the team.

Mary smiled and nodded. She watched Ella cross the creek bridge, and her eyes filled with tears. Theirs had been a severe four years here in the wilds. Together they had toiled fiercely against all challenges and threats—fire and snows, famine and the menace of Quirt Malotte who had once stolen Naieta and had robbed Dal's trapline.

They had begun to see a light ahead; promise which guided them to a greater hope for the future. Dal had built up the nucleus of a horse band. His little irrigation system, from the springs to the north, served his first grain acreage adequately, which acreage guaranteed Dal and his neighbors seed grain, provided that there was no early fall frost. But now fate had struck them more sharply than ever before, and Mary's heart was heavy with misgiving.

She conned the northwest—the forbidding mountain peaks—and tried to visualize the wild, rugged canyons and those plateaus where the wild creatures roamed, including King, the stallion leader and his band. She was afraid for the menfolk on the trail of Malotte.

Her lips parted, framing a gentle prayer for their safety.

Now Mary firmed her hands and returned to the cabin. The children required attention. There was plenty to occupy Mary's time, especially since Marta Carson, the scrupulous housekeeper, would shortly be along. Mary loved her neighbor, Marta. It was Marta who had brought both Mary's children into the world.

But as Mary worked, she wondered—wondered what was taking place in those upper levels, where cougar, grizzly, the wild horse band and Yat, the leader of the wild sheep band, roamed.

One thing that had happened was that Doc Carson had grimly held on to the trail of Dal's rustled stock. Now he was growing deadly weary.

"Sufferin' smoke of the seven-toed grampus!" he muttered as he lost his footing and slid down a steep gulch wall. He firmed a grip on the butt of his old .44, got painfully to his feet and started to rip out another barrage of sulphurous implications. A sharp twinge of pain in his arthritic leg arrested him.

It was as well he did button his lips, for a piece of loose rock rolling down the opposite bank, warned him of the presence of someone, or some creature. Doc froze. He forgot the pain in his leg. Twice, as he trailed the rustled stock, he had come across man tracks, despite the fact that every so often the rustler had come along his back trail brushing out his sign.

Doc realized that he was trailing a skilful

trail man. But on Doc's own admission, he had trailed such "varmints" as Malotte from the Mexican border to the Canadian line.

He swore softly under his breath at having sounded off at his fall. Slowly he melted back into the shadows of a small cave and, through narrowed eyes, conned the lip of the gulch wall opposite.

A hat suddenly caught his attention. Doc's lips grew taut and he toyed with the trigger guard of his gun. For Doc had wrangled stock and rustlers in districts where on such occasions as this men drew and threw lead and asked questions afterward.

"Carcajou critter should be plugged," he breathed softly.

He felt deeply for Dal Baldwin who had been a great friend and grand neighbor. But he realized that Dal himself would not have cut down any man in a drygulching. He would give even his worst enemy a chance to draw.

Now the man's face appeared momentarily.

"Malotte!" Doc muttered.

FROM Dal's description of the breed, and having on one occasion seen the breed, before he even knew Dal, Doc knew he was not mistaken. He slipped his trigger finger inside the guard.

"Jumpin' catfish!"

Surely it wouldn't be recorded as a crime against Doc if he plugged this critter who was less desirable at Sun-Bear Valley than the lowest carcajou. Doc mused on this subject as he trembled with the urge to cut loose. He had not forgotten Malotte's malefactions against Dal.

Now here this man creature had appeared, not more than forty feet from Doc's .44. He couldn't have missed him in the dark at that range, and yet Doc held his hand. Even though it was not impossible that Malotte might get clear away with all Dal's stock.

Sorely troubled, Doc continued to argue with himself until he suddenly heard the clatter of hoofs and realized that Malotte had mounted and was again on the trail of the rustled stock.

Doc flexed his limbs, groaning with pain. But he swore as he massaged his crippled leg. He had to get along, for soon the ashes of dusk would be sifted down on the wilds. The wild creatures would begin to call and prowl.

Stuffing fresh "eating tobacco" into his cheek, he replaced an old knife in his breeches pocket, gave his buckskins a hitch, and crawled up out of the gulch. He hit a rim-rock trail, but suddenly turned and moved back to the gulch.

Here, Indian fashion, he made sign wtih willows—trail sign which he knew Tom Bruce could read. Doc seemed to be sure that his former trail partner would be along the back trail somewhere, with Dal Baldwin.

But Doc was not psychic, and what he could not feel was that at this very moment Quirt Malotte was on his back trail, rubbing out sign. There would be no trail for anyone to follow.

The half-breed grinned. He had been the wise one, to send his cayuse clattering off along the rim-rock trail. The stolen horse band was already well-hidden in a grassy boxed-in meadow a few miles to the northeast, and now Malotte was intent on trapping his trailer. He fumbled with some green rawhide in his pocket, and scowled.

"D' leetle wan wit' d' bent knee," he told himself. "I mak' him weesh 'e never take my trail. Sapre tonnerre!"

The breed quivered with rage and hatred. He had always coveted the horse stock of Baldwin, the homesteader, especially the little blooded mare and her young stallion. These two alone would bring in much money, money which would give him security and ease for some time.

Cavalry officers would pay good prices for such stock. And Malotte promised himself a young squaw, one to do all camp work while he relaxed beyond reach of Baldwin, in a life of ease.

He crept forward, until he again picked up Carson's trail—an easy trail to follow—until it finally petered out in the hard rock trail.

Doc was moving with great caution now, realizing that he could not afford to make a misstep. He also realized that prying eyes might be watching.

Now and then he picked up sheep sign—tracks that were fairly fresh. He had always planned on a sheep hunt. He and Marta contemplated packing a lot of wild mutton down for winter.

Doc suddenly halted, freezing to complete immobility as he caught the close-in ringing bugle of King, the wild stallion leader. Doc had never seen the wild one. But, an old wrangler, he had thrilled many a time to the stories Dal Baldwin had told him of the big, savage gray one.

This wild, ringing cry brought memories of other areas to the south, where he had hunted wild horse bands. Slowly he shifted his eating tobacco from one cheek to the other.

All at once his eyes opened wide. Poised on a plateau a few hundred yards distant,

was the wild stallion, King, the most magnificent creature Doc had ever seen. Tail and mane pennanting in the breeze, the wild one posed in grandiose splendor.

It was obvious to Doc that the stallion was hurling a challenge at some creature in the area below. He watched King toss his head angrily, and stamp the ground sharply with his hoofs and instantly Doc realized that Dal Baldwin's horse band was not far off.

Cocking an ear, he half turned. He had caught a sound at his back, but the shadows were deepening now, and he could see no movement. He waited a long moment before again turning, and was in time only to see the silver tail of the wild king as the great one leaped from his line of vision.

DOC moved on. This new country, to eastward, intrigued him. It was gently rolling, and brush-covered. He conned with admiring eyes a belt of fire-killed spruce, stately and handsome log and lumber timber. He had visions of building the first schoolhouse in Sun-Bear Valley, with logs and whip-sawn lumber from this stand.

Now he reached the point at which the stallion had posed. A sharp gasp escaped him. Down in a grassy meadow, into which there seemed no inlet, and from which there was no outlet, save by a stiff climb of several feet, stood Dal's horses—Naieta, her young stock, and the little wild mare Dal had trapped in the hills.

But Doc suddenly started. Naieta's young stallion reared and lunged, screaming wildly as he caught the big wild king's scent.

"By the eye teeth of Sam Scratch!" Doc breathed. "The little feller's challengin' his pappy. If they meet, the King'll kill him shore as shootin'!"

Doc started to slide, recovered, then set himself for a well-timed leap to the grass below. He must get down and quiet that little hellion of Naieta's before damage was done.

Just as Doc poised himself, some object whirred and caught him sharply between the shoulder blades, hurtling him crashing to the turf below. He was barely conscious as he landed in a twisted heap, but he did hear a thick, throaty chuckle, a man-made sound, before he faded out into unconsciousness....

"So! D' leetle wan is awake, no!"

Doc started at the sound of the half-breed's voice. Dawn was breaking and Doc shivered with the cold. He had been tied up during the night and his limbs pained him, his back giving him especially severe pain.

He reached a hand down to his holster, but it was empty. The breed chuckled.

"Don't t'ink Malotte is a fool, m'sieu. I 'ave yo' gun." He drew closer to Carson and squatted down on his haunches, Indian fashion. "Eet is you who are a' foolish wan. Now Malotte mak you pay. Yo' frien's never fin' yo' trail. I back trail all tam an' feex tracks. Now I tie you up wit' wet rawhide. Tonnerre! You ever hear of heem? When she shrink an' grow tight—" Malotte made a face. "I know you know all 'bout heem," he hissed sharply through his teeth. "Sapre! Wan day I get d' beeg feller, Bal'win."

Doc was too badly hurt to offer any form of resistance. He had heard of the wet, green rawhide torture used by old Indians, and some white men. He had once come across a victim of such means of torture.

But if there was no fight in Doc's body, there was fight in his tongue.

"Yuh're a dirty horntoad, Malotte!" he growled. "And don' sell them frien's uh mine too short. They'll get yuh if they have to track yuh clear to the Canadian line. Yuh're worse'n a skunk-bear, and smell mos' nigh as bad!"

Malotte chocked the heel of his right hand hard into Doc's windpipe—a cruel blow which almost sent Doc back into unconsciousness. While he fought for breath, he felt the wet rawhide being fixed as he was tied by the wrists and forehead to a sapling, in the glare of the sun. Its heat would shrink the thongs tighter, tighter.

Doc wondered about Dal and Tom.

The sun rose like a fiery ball as it scored through the dawn mists. Hatless, standing against his bonds, Doc already found it difficult to breathe. He could not turn his head an inch, nor move his arms. Malotte had moved into his line of vision and was eating a meal of jerked venison, washing it down with cool spring water which he drank from his black sombrero.

Doc Carson's throat and mouth were parched, his lips cracked, but he would die of thirst rather than appeal for water.

For an hour or more the half-breed slept, his head pillowed in his saddle. Doc, almost in a semi-coma, dozed, but every now and then awakened with a start, gasping as his bonds grew tighter. His temples throbbed fiercely and in his heart there was a deep, sorrowing thought for Marta.

The day dragged on. Doc's tongue was thickening. As the sun swung, the breed came and turned Doc toward it, readjusting the bonds.

[*Turn to page 82*]

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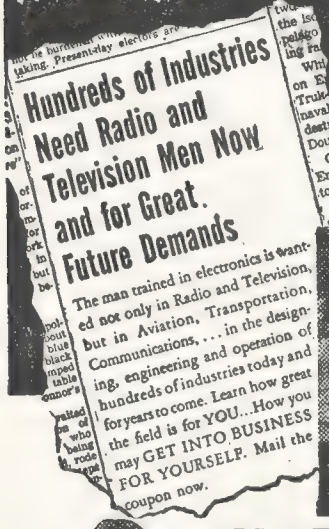
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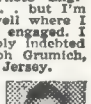

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"D' eyes begin to bulge, leetle wan," he jeered. "Soon dey bulge more an' more an' . . .!" He cracked Carson across the jaw with the side of his hand.

"Dir—ty sidewinder," Doc croaked. "He had no voice left.

Malotte left him like that and went off to where Dal's stolen stock was being held.

FILLED with conceit and confidence, Malotte skilfully flipped a lass rope over the neck of the young stallion. Doc Carson was suddenly startled by the young one's scream—a scream of rage and fear. Through half-dimmed eyes Doc watched the breed snub the colt down to a sapling.

"The nitchi's as quick as a cottonmouth," Doc told himself.

The breed then proceeded to whale the youngster with a bridle. A brutal attack this on the beautiful son of the wild king.

The method Malotte employed to tame the young one quickly caused Doc to groan with pity for the colt. Doc had wrangled many a wild one, but he had never resorted to any form of cruelty.

With a suddenness that startled Doc, the thong about his wrists loosened. In the change of position, Malotte must have hurried this tie. Doc's urge, impetuously, was to make an immediate attempt to free himself, but his better judgment prevailed. He watched the breed continue to slash the colt fore and aft with the bridle's bit. Blood was mixed with the white lather on the young one's flanks.

Now the breed toted over his saddle. Doc gasped as he watched the stallion leap back, then as quickly lunge forward. But he suddenly seemed to have expended his effort to fight back. He now hung his head like a jaded cowpony, and trembled as that strange thing was lofted to his back, and the cinch tightened.

Doc glared at his captor, and shook with pity for Dal's handsome young colt—the finest, most spirited young stallion he had ever seen.

As Malotte completed his saddling, Doc attempted to untie the thongs at the back of his neck. The dry, shrunken knots could not be budged, but Doc could move his hands behind his back. All at once he thought of his old tobacco knife, one that Tom Bruce, the blacksmith, had made for him out of a piece of old sheep shear blade.

Panting with elation, Doc discovered the knife in his pants pocket. He almost broke his nails in opening it. As the blade slipped once, Doc swore bitterly beneath his breath.

He looked up sharply as there came a wild cry from Malotte. The breed had succeeded in forking the stallion and Doc was treated to as masterful an exhibition of busting as anything he had ever seen, though at times he suspected the breed of pulling leather.

The little stallion had come unwound, had found a new reserve of fighting spirit. He showed more tricks than many an old wild mustang Doc had seen in end-swapping, sunfishing maneuvers.

Malotte lashed and roweled him fiercely. Then he was riding him hard at a steep bank. Twice the colt lunged and almost fell to the ground, nearly piling his rider.

In his excitement, Doc all but pitched to his face on the ground. He was free, though terribly weak. Slowly he recovered his balance and glanced across at Malotte's rifle and equipment. Doc wondered if his own six-gun was there too.

Doc moved cautiously in. Malotte had turned the colt and was riding him hard again at the bank when Doc lunged forward and retrieved his .44.

"Now, yuh all-fired polecat," he growled, "there ain't no law of Gawd nor man could hang me for what I aim to do!"

Doc raised his gun with both hands, setting his sights just ahead of the man creature's head as he rode low on the stallion's neck. Naieta's son was driving madly at the high bank.

Suddenly the youngster reared in his lunge. His effort to clear the bank was gallant. Carson, taken off balance, pulled. His shot was wild, but it caused the young stallion to swerve in mid-leap, coming crashing over backward, pinning the breed beneath him.

Doc Carson trembled with excitement and fear—fear only for the stallion, which lay now on his off side. For a long moment Doc was unable to move. But suddenly he found a reserve of strength. He started forward, but had scarcely taken a step when he heard a sharp bark at his back. He spun, to glimpse dimly the bounding form of Dandy, Tom Bruce's shepherd dog.

MALOTTE had not thought of the keen sense of smell of the dog, if he even knew there was a dog at Sun-Bear Valley.

Now Doc heard the booming voice of Tom Bruce, and a hail from Dal, who came tearing down to the bottomland.

"My good gosh!" the little man gasped weakly and slipped slowly down in a faint. The strain had been too great. . . .

Doc awakened at the feel of ice-cold spring

[*Turn to page 84*]

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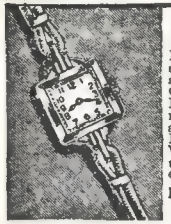

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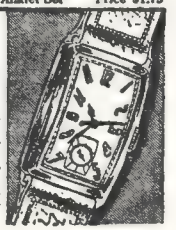

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water at the base of his neck. Faintly he heard voices, then slowly recognition came.

"Yuh little old hellion, yuh!"

It was Tom Bruce's voice Doc first recognized. The big blacksmith-homesteader was holding up Doc's head, while Dal held a hatful of water to his mouth. Doc attempted to grin.

"Th-anks — Tom — Dal," he breathed. "Glory, but that water's—fine. But-but what about the—uh—the colt, Dal? Me'n him put up a real fight. I'd have had that wideloopin' breed cold in a few minutes. Reminds me uh the time I was—"

"The colt'll be all right, pardner," Dal cut in. "Shook up some, and slashed, but he's onto his legs ag'in. The man critter's done, though. Mightn't last out the night. We thought when we heard yore shot yuh mebbe plugged him, and we wasn't of a mind to call yuh for it. Yuh've been through a bad time, Doc. Tom claims it's Mayan, or Aztec torture yuh was put to. That right, Tom?"

"Yeah, but they can't kill off this old horntoad that-a-way, Dal," Bruce chuckled, and unwrapped a package he had brought along. "Yuh'd be better for a mouthful of food, Doc," he advised. "Cold mutton san'wich, with cherry relish trimmin's. No coffee nor pie, though. Here, eat somethin', and take a few more swallers of water."

They made a bed for Doc, and one for the breed. Malotte was pretty badly pulped. They did not expect him to survive, but at dawn, he was still alive.

Tom and Dal worked with pole levers on some rocks at the easterly end of the grassy bottom land, clearing an easier way out. Dal caught up Naieta and saddled her with the breed's saddle, carefully hoisting Malotte aboard.

"Reckon you'll have to ride in bareback, Doc," Dal said with a grin. "Yuh can fork the little buckskin mare."

Slowly they left the boxed meadow, striking eastward first, before turning south to hit the dim home trail.

Along the new trail, they halted now and then to admire this new area of good land.

"It's a fine stock country, Dal," Tom Bruce suggested. "Could accommodate four-five families right easy, with lots of timber for buildin' and firewood. Little clearin' required for grain an' alfalfa acreage, and that grass bottomland we found Doc and the stock in—see the springs there? Man dear, a homesteader's paradise! Pity we didn't know of some good settlers, huh?"

"Eh-h-h-h-h?" Doc Carson suddenly come awake. "You-all don't know the half of it. What about that belt of dry spruce for our schoolhouse? Enough lumber there for roofin' for all of us, if we're a mind to whipsaw her up. If it wouldn't be such a tough job pullin' Marta away from her cabbage patch at the crick, I'd be a-minded to come up here my ownself."

Dal smiled. Doc's spirit was returning. The little man was a marvel.

Much as Dal had reason to hate the half-breed, he halted the train every now and then to see to Malotte.

"Yuh brought this down on yore own head, Malotte," he said. "I've warned yuh off the range more'n once. There ain't a thing we can do for yuh till we get to my place, and even there—well, I don't know. Mebbe it'd be the best thing for you if yuh started some prayin'."

Malotte's dimmed eyes stared wildly.

"Mon dieu! I know—ver'—leetle 'bout dat. I been bad wan—mos'—my life. Mebbe—you say somethin'—the—beads or—"

His voice trailed off, and Dal thought he had passed along. He half turned to call on Doc, but just then the dog, Dandy, from a rise of land near-by, barked sharply.

NAIETA up ahead raised her head, sniffed sharply into the wind, then whinnied shrilly. There came the long, though distant rumbling of wagon wheels.

"Settlers!" Bruce exclaimed.

"Homesteaders!" Doc breathed huskily.

Dal Baldwin was silent. He listened intently until the wagon sound ceased. He wondered if the settlers would be real folk, like the Bruces and Carsons. . . .

When finally they reached the Baldwin homestead yard it was to find two wagon outfits there, the teams unhitched and feeding on Dal's alfalfa. Mary Baldwin rushed to greet her husband.

"Dal—Dal darling!" she breathed softly, as he caught her into his arms. "I—we thought you were . . . Oh, Dal!"

Dal held her closely, as Marta hobbled up on her crutch to shoot a swift glance at her husband.

"Why, yuh little old mountebank!" she cried, tears streaming down her homely face. "Yore head and face is swole up just like yuh'd fell into a wild bees' nest."

Doc slid painfully to the ground and Marta gathered him into her ample embrace. Ella Bruce, more hysterical than the others, wept copiously in Tom's arms.

Two tall men, obviously father and son, strode toward the Sun-Bear Valley folk now. Womenfolk, their womenfolk, shyly watched

from the cabin stoop.

"Dal—meet up with Mr. Morrison, and his son, Jack Morrison. They've got five children, Dal, mostly all of school age." Mary Baldwin smiled warmly as she made the introductions.

"Pleased to know yuh both," Dal said with warmth, and introduced Tom and Doc in turn.

"Yuh kind of caught up with us at a bad time, Morrison," Dal added. "A rustlin' varmint has been makin' trouble ever since Mary and me first hit the valley. He caught up with hisse'f, though. Reckon he won't last much longer."

Dal excused himself and hurried back to Naieta. Shortly he called on Doc.

"Reckon he's gone, Doc," Dal said softly. "Yuh'd best give a look at him."

They lowered Malotte to the ground and Doc took the man's pulse. He turned to Mary.

"Yuh better fetch me a mirror, please," he said.

When the little cracked mirror came, Doc assumed a professional air. But it was just like Doc. Dal whispered to the elder Morrison that he was quite sure Doc knew the man was dead before he asked for the mirror.

"A polecat if they ever was one," Doc grunted, after he had pronounced Malotte dead. "We'd better get Tom's bull oufit and tote the body up for a—uh—burial. The first at Sun-Bear Valley. But while you all do some diggin', I aim to rustle me some coffee."

At the newly dug, shallow grave, Doc took over and assumed the rôle of parson. The other men folk were lowering the body on harness lines.

Reverently Doc intoned parts of the funeral service.

"A'mighty Gawd," he went on reverently, "we're gathered here, the decent folks of Sun-Bear Valley, to perform the last rites for a human critter that weren't fit to live. We're handin' him across to you for judgment, for it ain't for us to make such judgment. The wilderness has handed out its own form of justice."

Doc paused and coughed as he looked about, rather proud of his effort so far.

"I now commit the body to the—uh—grave, which should have mebbe been a foot or so deeper. Ashes to ashes, dust to—"

Doc glared up at Tom Bruce, who was having trouble with the leather rein.

"Amen!" Doc concluded abruptly.

There were no tears for Malotte, but the

[*Turn page*]

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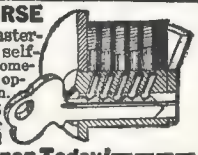

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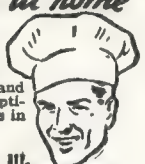

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settlers had given him a decent burial. Now the womenfolk retired to the cabin, to prepare a supper. Out of doors, the men talked as Dal showed the Morrisons about his homestead and pointed to Doc and Tom's places in the distance.

"I'm aimin' to make a start in poll' Angus cattle, Baldwin," the elder Morrison said. "Not many, so I'll run yuh all out of range, but just breeder stock. Jack here has the same ideas. If there's some ploughable land along with some stock pasture, that'll suit us just right."

DAL told the Morrisons of the land to the northeast.

"Yuh can all make your camp at my place for as long as yuh've a-mind to," he added. "Welcome to all we got, Morrison."

"Judson—Jud Morrison—to you, Dal," the elder Morrison said warmly. "We're everlastin' obliged to yuh all. If the topland yuh speak of is all right, we'll get to work pronto. Then if everything adds up right I aim, as I was tellin' yore good woman, to bring a niece up—a school-marm niece."

"Schoolmarm? Why, uh—that's just what we want!" Doc Carson was all excitement. "Eh-h-h-h-h— I can show yuh the finest stand of timber for a schoolhouse yuh ever saw!"

"How many young 'uns you got, Doc?" Morrison asked pleasantly.

"Why—uh—well, that is, I . . . Ever young 'un in Sun-Bear Valley is my young 'un." Doc Carson chuckled. "Ask Dal if that ain't so."

Mary Baldwin was calling the men to supper, by banging on an old plough share with a piece of iron. They filed up and washed.

At the table, Doc called on all of them to bow their heads. A blessing must be asked, and grace said.

"And A'mighty Gawd," Doc concluded, "we first settlers of the Valley thank yuh for the blessin's of these fine new settlers, new neighbors. Give us all the power to keep on helpin' each other along. We thank thee, Gawd, for the young 'uns, especially—the new young 'uns that have come up to play with our'n, and when the time comes to work. A-men."

Not so far had there been a meal enjoyed more by all in Sun-Bear Valley. The womenfolk, under Marta's efficient direction, and with victuals augmented by new supplies brought in by the Morrisons, had prepared a feast indeed. Corn on the cob, a baked haunch of venison, with some fried ham and

honey, pickles and wild berries and rich cream, and flaky biscuits baked by the elder Mrs. Morrison.

Dal rode Naieta over for Doc's fiddle, and Jud Morrison asked if he might bring in a banjo from his wagon.

They tuned up the fiddle and banjo, and managed to strike nearly the same tone. Doc suddenly crashed into the chords of a foot-tickling reel—"The Flowers of Edinburgh." From this he ripped expertly through his repertoire of jigs and reels, ably accompanied by Jud. Then Dal Baldwin called for a waltz.

Crude homestead furniture was scraped back. Dal, Tom Bruce and Jack Morrison took their wives for partners and with a grace that was pleasant to watch, despite the cramped space and rough flooring, they danced until Doc scraped out a final chord.

There was a supper, later, when the Morrison children were introduced again. The elder Mrs. Morrison, who throughout the dancing had neighbored with Marta Carson, introduced her children—twins—a boy and girl of eleven.

"Martin and Maureen. Don't look like twins," Mrs. Morrison said. "Mebbe because Jud's a Yankee an' I'm Norwegian. Olga's my name. Then, besides my children, there's Jack's three—little baby Jud, five months; Nell, four, and the scamp uh the outfit, Ollie, five. A whole schoolful of Morrisons if you ask me."

Doc Carson, tears streaming down his face, played softly from a suite, a wilderness suite he had composed himself. Never had the little man of many parts been happier, and despite the pain in his body, he continued to play, as the night deepened and it was time to return to his homestead.

Night! Calm, and peaceful at Sun-Bear. Dal and Jud Morrison stood in silence. The stock were all bedded down and the wilderness had seemed to mute all sounds, save the soft whisper of the breeze in the near-by spruces.

"I'm inclined to think the Morrisons are here to stay, Dal," Jud breathed.

"Yeah, and I'm opinin' the same, Jud. Welcome."

They turned and walked slowly back to the store shed where the menfolk would bed down for the night.

•

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TRAIL CAMP

(Continued from page 8)

steer decorating and Everett Shaw in the single roping.

Of course these figures are far from final for the season, but they show which way the wind is blowing.

A Case of Vandalism

The Fiesta de Los Vaqueros (which boiled down or translated still means rodeo) of Tucson, Arizona, always noted for its great parade of many and varied types of vehicles, will have to do some tall hustling to have a creditable parade, because youthful vandals have made way with or ruined approximately a hundred pieces of rolling stock usually used in the parade, together with the harness for many of the vehicles.

Many of the vehicles were of old-time vintage and had historical backgrounds. It is estimated that the damage ran over ten thousand dollars. The vehicles were stored in barns or buildings on the grounds and the pilfering and damage was probably going on for quite a while before being discovered.

News of Rodeo Folks

A certain show and theatrical magazine reported a few days ago that Gene Autry had signed for two years with the World's Championship Rodeo in Madison Square Garden at seventy-five thousand dollars for each rodeo. We are quite sure that Gene has signed for the rodeo for 1946, and while we are sure that he will draw down a nice sum of money for each engagement he plays at the Garden, there must be something that goes with Gene if the figures are correct, because we can hardly conceive of the Garden, which really puts on the biggest rodeo in the world, paying such a sum for one star alone.

It is reported that Roy Rogers and Col. Jim Eskew will stage a number of rodeos during the 1946 season. Roy was guest star at seven of the Colonel's rodeos this season and the report is that they will form a co-partnership in the production of a number of big shows this coming season, some of them being in the middle west.

Mark B. Askin, 3 year old son of Bob Askin, who was one of the greatest bronc riders of a quarter of a century ago, was burned to death in a horse trailer fire at his home near Ismay, Montana. Bob, the father, was in Miles City on business and the mother, Mrs. Askin, was teaching school at the time. It is thought that little Mark was playing with matches in the horse trailer and ignited loose hay on the floor of the trailer.

Chester Byers, world's champion fancy roper, who won the title at the New York Stampede staged at Sheepshead Bay Speedway in August, 1916, and who successfully defended the title as long as fancy roping was placed on a contest basis at rodeos, died suddenly of a heart attack at his home in Fort Worth, Texas, November 1st. Byers was 53 years old and is survived by his widow and a daughter.

The fifth annual convention, banquet and

party of the Rodeo Fans of America was held in New York during the rodeo there. First the banquet took place at the Hotel Belvedere with Roy Rogers as honor guest, then the entire delegation, nearly six hundred strong, attended the evening performance of the World's Championship Rodeo in Madison Square Garden and after the performance they returned to the hotel where a party and dance went on until nearly daylight.

The 20th Annual World's Championship Rodeo at Madison Square Garden, New York had a run of 33 days. Total purses of $121,200 were posted by the Garden, to which were added in entrance fees paid in by the contestants $24,590, making a grand total of $145,790 in prize money.

Brigadier General John Reed Kilpatrick was president of the rodeo, Ned Irish acting president, Frank Moore rodeo manager, and Everett E. Colborn managing director. The judges were Carl Dossey, Harry Hart and Milt Moe. The chute boss was Alvin Gordon, the superintendent of livestock was Howard Brown, the arena secretary was Fred Alvord, and the announcer was Abe Lefton.

Music for the rodeo was furnished by James Cimmeron's Cowboy Band, with Ray Whitley and his Oklahoma Wranglers furnishing the background music for the appearances of Roy Rogers, guest star.

A Gala Program

The program consisted of the introduction of the six glamour ranch girls, each of whom rode a white horse, and immediately upon

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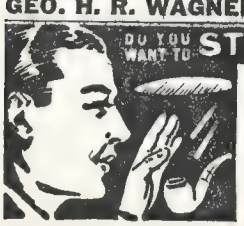

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their introduction came the grand entry of mounted cowboys and cowgirls in a mystic maze or serpentine ride which filled the arena with colorful riders and prancing cowponies.

Event No. 2 was the bareback bronc riding contest, No. 3 the horseback quadrille, No. 4 the calf roping contest, No. 5 trick and fancy roping exhibition by Maidie and Ray Blatherwick, No. 6 the cowboys' saddle bronc riding contest, No. 7 Roy Rogers and Trigger, No. 8 the cowboys' steer wrestling contest, No. 9 cowboys' and cowgirls' trick and fancy riding, No. 10 cowboys' wild cow milking contest, No. 11 Jeff Reavis in a special exhibition with his great horse "Danger," No. 12 the cowboys' wild Brahma bull riding contest and No. 13 the closing event of each performance, was the wild horse race.

George Mills, Jasbo Fulkerson and Jack Knapp were the rodeo clowns.

Final Results

The final results in bareback bronc riding were: 1st, Bud Linderman; 2nd, Bill Linderman; 3rd, Gerald Roberts; 4th, Todd Whatley; 5th, Buster Ivory; 6th, Hank Mills.

In calf roping: 1st, Toots Mansfield; 2nd, Tom Taylor; 3rd, Dick Truitt; 4th, Shoat Webster; 5th, Roy Matthews; 6th, John Pogue. In cowboys' bronc riding; 1st, Bart Clennon; 2nd, Jerry Ambler; 3rd, Buster Ivory; 4th, Jack Wade; 5th, Gerald Roberts; 6th, Bill Linderman.

In steer wrestling: 1st, Homer Pettigrew; 2nd, Eddie Curtis; 3rd, Frank Van Meter; 4th, George Yardley; 5th, Norman Person; 6th, Al Garrett. In bull riding: 1st, G. K. Lewellen, the only contestant out of 42 entries in the event to ride through the 13 trials without being bucked off; 2nd, Gerald Roberts; 3rd, Ken Roberts. A tie for fourth place split fourth and fifth prizes between Dick Griffith and Marvin Shoulders. Todd Whatley won sixth place.

In the wild cow milking: 1st Shoat Webster; 2nd, Toots Mansfield; 3rd, Roy Lewis.

There were numerous injuries and one fatality. Homer Cook, of Livingston, Montana, was kicked by a horse in the wild horse race and died almost instantly.

Top Money Winners

Of the $145,790 in prize money there were 50 contestants whose winnings ran over a thousand dollars, 81 whose winnings were more than five hundred dollars, five contestants whose winnings were only thirty dollars, and 53 contestants who paid their own expenses and entrance fees and failed to win anything.

The Big Ten, or ten top money winners were as follows: 1st, Bill Linderman, $6,186.66; 2nd, Toots Mansfield, $5,709.50; 3rd, Bud Linderman, $5,395.00; 4th, Homer Pettigrew, $5,120.00; 5th, Ken Roberts, $4,360.00; 6th, Royce Sewalt, $3,874.50; 7th G. K. Lewellen, $3,837.50; 8th, Gerald Roberts, $3,831.00; 9th, Shoat Webster, $3,216.00; 10th, Buster Ivory, $2,712.50.

So it was that ten cowboys won a total of $44,242.66, which is a lot of money for ten

cowboys to earn or win in just a little over a month. That amount of money, back in the trail-driving days of the cowboy, would have paid the range salary of approximately a thousand cowboys for the same length of time that it took these ten to win the amount in the rodeo arena!

The Boston Show

The Boston Rodeo staged at Boston Garden, while not as large and not billed for near so long a run, was practically the same rodeo as the one held in New York, on a smaller scale, the contestants all being those who had been in the competition at Madison Square Garden.

There was the same managing director, the same stock and the same judges. The program was very much the same as at Madison Square Garden, but there was no wild horse race. It was an excellent rodeo and drew a big attendance.

The finals winners in bareback bronc riding were: First—Bill Linderman; Second—Bud Linderman; Third—Gerald Roberts; Fourth—Paul Bond.

Everett Shaw won the calf roping, Zeano Ferris took second place, Homer Pettigrew was third and Buck Sorrells was fourth.

Gerald Roberts was top man in the saddle bronc riding, Bill McMackin was second, Ken Roberts was third and Bill Linderman was fourth. Steve Heacock copped the steer wrestling, Bud Linderman took second place, Earl Blevins was third and Dave Campbell was fourth.

[*Turn page*]

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Dick Griffith was best man in the bull riding, Ken Roberts was second, Gerald Roberts was third and Bob Estes was fourth. Buck Sorrells outmilked the others to win first place in the wild cow milking, Shoat Webster was second and N. A. Pittcock was third.

Well waddies, that about winds up another Trail Camp and we will start the herd and the wagon along the trail, our next camping place will in all probability be in Texas and until then I'll be saying *Adios*.

—FOG HORN CLANCY.

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

ANOTHER smashing Steve Reese novel hits the boards in the next issue of RANGE RIDERS WESTERN, with Hank Ball and Dusty Trail flanking their CPA trail part in as fast a shoot-out as ever came from the galloping pen of any author.

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Our best beeves have been stolen. We weren't able to track them. One of my line riders was killed by a carbine bullet, I reckon when he bumped into the thieves at work. Some days before our cows were run off, one of our members, Jacob Boles, was robbed and shot dead by an outlaw—a young fellow named Frank Allison was supposed to have done the job, but he escaped from our calaboose after slugging the town marshal. Whether this has anything to do with our cattle losses, we can't say.

In less time than you can say "rattlesnake," Steve Reese is entangled with the confederates of the under-cover band that rules the ranges along the famous Texas river. Reese's suspicions have centered upon a tall gambler who sports shiny half-boots, a fancy vest, and a black string tie. This man is known as "The Gentleman," for his immaculate, black attire, and carefully waxed mustache. His true name is Percy Standish.

When the CPA detective sees this gent slipping into the shadows of Tin Can Alley behind the Brazos Barroom, Reese follows him to a meeting with a gray-haired cattle buyer. The story goes on:

In the sandy dirt between the darkened buildings, Reese's toes made scarcely a sound. But there was a light in Tin Can Alley, and it came from the rear windows of the Brazos House and other places. The elderly man, facing that way, glimpsed the dark figure of Reese dashing in, and he gave a hoarse, startled cry.

The Gentleman reacted instantly. He whipped himself around, throwing himself low as he sought escape.

"Hold it, Standish," called Reese. "I'll fire if you—"

The elderly man was now in the way, and he blocked the narrow passage. He came bumping into Reese, clumsily, and it gave the Gentleman time to reach the turn.

Percy Standish disappeared as Reese's bullet, aimed at the Gentleman's moving legs, missed and plunged into the board sidewalk of the street beyond. But Standish fired back, and the bullet whistled a yard over Reese's head.

Reese sought to pass the elderly man, but he was all tangled up with him. The fellow was gasping, as in apparent panic, and he held to the tall range detective's arm.

"Let go!" Reese snapped, and he jabbed the gray-head in the stomach.

The elderly man doubled up but hung on for moments before Reese could beat him off.

Now gunshots came from up the line—that would be Dusty Trail and Hank Ball, who heard the first two explosions, and sought to help their leader. Pounding of hoofs told that the Gentleman's gang was tearing in. A smashing fusillade of shots echoed in the street, and there were shrieks, blood-curdling yells, and the crack of breaking window glass.

Reese streaked out of the alley to take part in the fight. But Percy Standish was already mounted. Riders were galloping full-tilt over the plaza of the town. Lead was slugging into the buildings and kicking up splinters from the plank walks.

Reese sent a couple of followers after the running gang. They reached the opposite side of the plaza and disappeared behind the line of buildings there.

Marshal Harry Pier, roused by the heavy gunfire, emerged from the Brazos House, gun in hand.

"What in tarnation is goin' on out here!" the marshal howled.

[*Turn page*]

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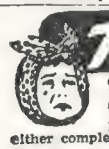

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Reese, nettled by the failure of his plan to stop the Gentleman, turned to deal with the elderly gray-head who had blocked him. But the stranger had gone off.

And that's the start of bullet festivities in GUNS ALONG THE BRAZOS, another rip-roaring novel about Steve Reese, Hank Ball, and Dusty Trail. In addition to this high-powered epic of the rangeland, there will be a number of sure-fire short stories in the next issue, and Foghorn Clancy will be on hand again—all of which makes RANGE RIDERS WESTERN the real sage-scented, fast-action book of fiction that its tries so hard to be!

LETTERS FROM READERS

THE first splendid letter that we opened up in today's mail was just what we have been asking for—some good constructive criticism! And here is what the letter said:

I enjoy RANGE RIDERS WESTERN very much, and I remember well the best stories. These were GUNWOLF OF COUGAR CREEK, by Lee E. Wells, and GUNWOLVES RIDE SAWMILL CREEK, by Samuel Mines. I think Dusty Trail and Hank Ball should play a bigger part in the stories about Steve Reese, and I also think RANGE RIDERS WESTERN should be published more often.—*Wilbur Halliday, Parkdale, Oregon.*

Thanks plenty, Mr. Halliday, and you can just bet your best pair of spurs that we're going to talk things over with our authors and show them your letter. We've often thought that Hank Ball and Dustry Trail merited more of a share in Steve Reese's adventures, but we were waiting for our letter-writ-

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ing pards to come forward and say so.

Let that be a hint to all you readers who have been a bit squeamish about telling RANGE RIDERS WESTERN how to run the magazine. We'll be waiting for your advice, too. Here is another letter that makes us sit up and take notice:

Just to tell you how I enjoyed RED HARVEST, by Harold F. Cruickshank, in RANGE RIDERS WESTERN. It is tops in my notion. Please keep on printing stories about Dal and Mary Baldwin in the Pioneer Folk Tales series. They are swell.—*Mrs. Bert Johnson, Kenton, Ohio.*

We also think that the Pioneer Folk Tales are wonderful stories, Mrs. Benton, and you will be glad to know that they are favorites with a great many of our readers. You can count on many more stories about Dal and Mary Baldwin.

Our readers are still puzzling over Steve Reese's love life. It is always interesting to know how many of our steady letter writers are anxious for more romance.

I sure do enjoy RANGE RIDERS WESTERN, but if you put a little love in the stories, I think people would enjoy them more. Please excuse my abrupt criticism.—*Betty C. Maxey, Montgomery, Alabama.*

We certainly don't need to "excuse" your criticism, Miss Maxey. We welcome it—and we want more of it. We also want to thank you for writing us.

I've been reading RANGE RIDERS WESTERN for a long time and my favorite was GUNWOLVES RIDE SAWMILL CREEK. But I like them all.—*George Wood, Bronx, N. Y.*

You can be assured, Mr. Wood, that we'll try to get more stories like the one mentioned. Your letter is short but mighty nice to receive, and we hope we get many more like it.

All you other readers, please remember to address a letter or postcard to The Editor, RANGE RIDERS WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. We'll be waiting to hear from you.

We only wish we could quote from each and every letter received—but we're grateful for them all, and give them all earnest consideration whether there's room for them in these columns or not. See you next issue, and meanwhile good luck to you all. And thanks in advance for your letters about this issue, which we hope you've enjoyed!

—THE EDITOR.

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GRIZZLY BEAR IS WHERE YOU FIND IT

A True Story of the West

By TEX MUMFORD

NO REAL sensible Texan ever goes bear hunting these days without remembering what happened to two lucky ranchers back before the turn of the century. As a result of their breath-taking experience, their names will live forever in the archives of the National Museum in Washington, D. C. This fame is due to the fact that they stumbled upon one of the very few, if not the only, grizzly bears ever seen in the Lone Star State.

While attending an outing given by a group of families up in the Davis Mountains near

the Saw Tooth Range, at a beautiful spot called the "Rock Pile" and now used by the State of Texas as a recreation ground, Mr. C. O. Finley and Mr. John Means started out with a large group of riders and a pack of dogs to hunt ordinary Texas bears.

After traveling across a lot of rough country laced by canyon and peak, Finley and Means struck off with some of the dogs by themselves and soon ran into a dead four-year-old cow partly eaten by a varmint.

With the yammering dogs leading the way, the two men trailed their quarry through brush, rock, canyon, and just plain ornery going.

Several times the dogs got far ahead and then came back with sheepish looks in their eyes and their tails a little too close to their legs. Finley and Means urged the pack back to the enemy, and presently they cornered the old bear down in the brush of Merrill Canyon. Dismounting from their broncs, the two men walked forward with 30-30's until they saw

their black furry target.

Their first shots struck home, but instead of dropping in his tracks the bruin began to bellow like a wild bull and made a dash at all the yapping dogs. Bruin caught one dog and tore the poor fellow so badly that the dog had to be done away with later on. It took four more shots to melt the bear down to his size.

It was then that Finley and Means discovered gray tips of hair on the bruin, and they started yelling like Comanche Injuns, because they never before had heard of a grizzly paying a visit to the State of Texas. That varmint weighed 800 pounds. They skinned the bear and took head, legs and pelt back to camp, where the night was spent about the campfire telling the story over and over again to the other hunters.

Finley boiled the head in a tub of water, scraped out all the flesh, and hung the skull over the door of his ranchhouse. Several months later, he had a guest from the biological department in Washington, who was searching for strange specimens in Texas. This man became so much interested in the grizzly bear skull that he sent it to the nation's capital.

In Washington, the skull was soon arousing much speculation. And later, when the Dallas Fair wrote asking for a loan of the bear's head, this is what the Division of Wildlife wrote in reply:

"Under ordinary circumstances we should be glad to arrange so that this specimen might be exhibited at the Fair. However, this particular specimen was used by Dr. C. Hart Merriman, former chief of the Biological Survey, as a basis for description of a new race of grizzly bear, namely Ursus horriaeus texensis, and this particular skull is the type form selected for this race. In fact, this skull is the only known specimen of its kind in the world.

"Because of the great value of these cases in the National Museum in order 'types' they are kept in fireproof, locked vault that they might be safeguarded against loss. . . . It seems to us it would be exceedingly unfortunate to take a chance of subjecting this specimen to the risks of transportation and exhibition at the Fair. . . . You would be interested to know that the names of the men who collected the specimen are on the label and that credit was given in publication of the description of this 'type' specimen!"

And that's how two lucky bear hunters struck it rich!

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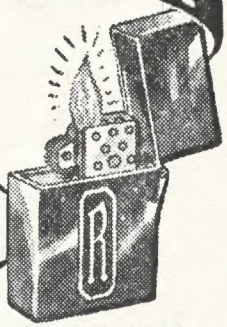

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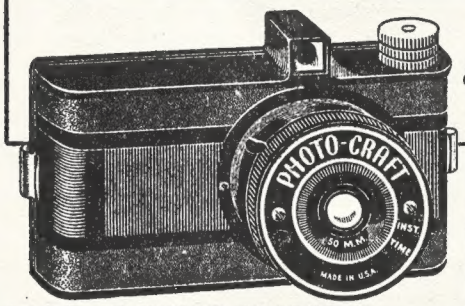

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SEE HERE, YOU BETTER SHUT UP OR I'LL---
YOU'LL WHAT— YOU POOR CHUMP
OH, JOE, WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO GROW UP AND BE A MAN!
DOGGONE! I'M FED UP WITH BEING A WEAKLING—I'LL GET CHARLES ATLAS'S FREE BOOK AND FIND OUT WHAT HE CAN DO FOR ME!
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ONE HAND IS AS GOOD AS TWO WHEN YOU'RE AN ATLAS CHAMP
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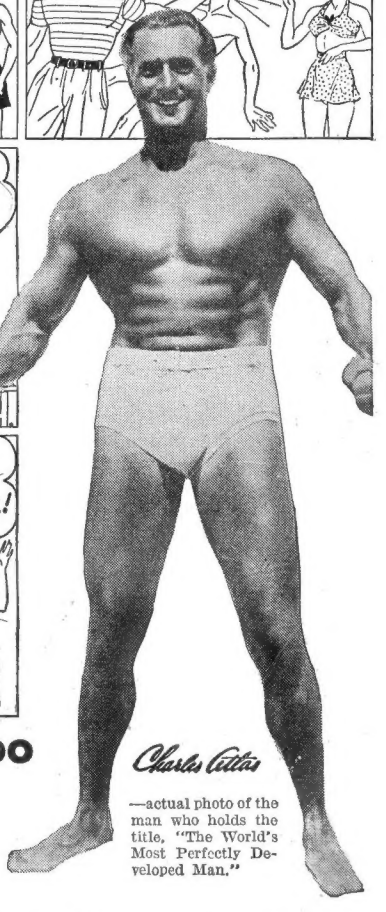

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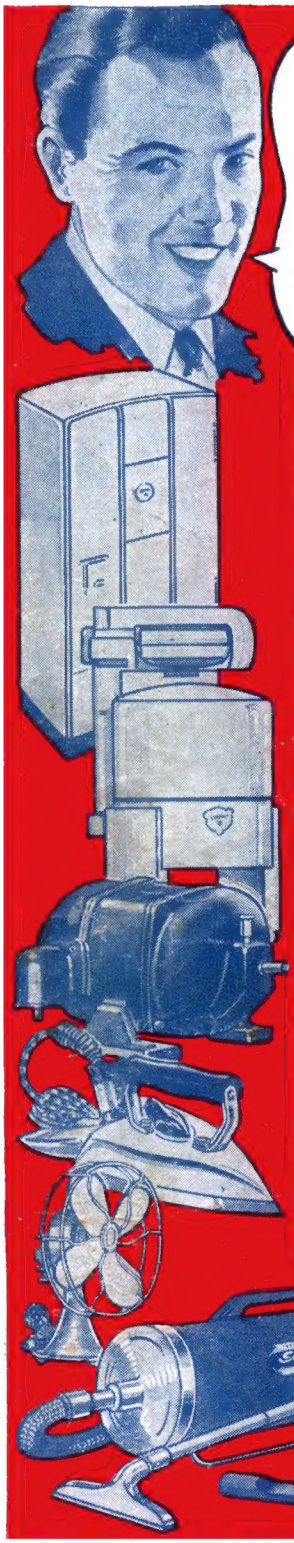

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